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**Education, Development Scholarships and Women's  
Empowerment: Exploring the Impacts of the Vietnam Education  
Foundation Fellowship**

**A Research Report presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree  
of Master's in International Development  
At Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand**

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**2017**

## **Abstract**

The research project explores the impacts that international development scholarship programmes have had on women's empowerment in Vietnam drawing on a case study of the Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF) Fellowship Programme and its female Fellows. Evaluations of such scholarship schemes are often limited to quantitative assessments of the number of graduates, degrees obtained or professional promotions after graduation. While education is understood as being a significant means for women's empowerment, an understanding of how these education scholarship programmes have impacted on women's empowerment is still under-studied, especially in the context of Vietnam.

This research provides an in-depth qualitative exploration of the experiences of five female VEF Fellows who pursued Master's or Ph.D. degree programmes in the STEM fields in the U.S. and have now returned to work in Vietnam.

The research findings have shown that while the VEF Fellowship has had mostly positive impacts on women's empowerment, it also resulted in some challenges for the women once back in Vietnam. In terms of the positive impacts, participants of the research reported they have now become self-confident and independent women. They have more self-respect and also gain respect from others. While previously, their decisions were influenced by others, now they make decisions in line with their own wishes. They are also able to access more career opportunities and enlarge their networks. In return, these VEF Fellows have exercised their expertise and positive attributes to support others within their family, their workplace, the community and the country at large. This transformation is a manifestation of the women's empowerment.

Nonetheless, taking on the study opportunity also created some negative outcomes influencing women's empowerment to some extent. When coming back, these VEF Fellows have encountered "reverse culture shock", the feeling of loss and disorientation, negative reactions from family and friends for their being allegedly "Westernized", and personal dissatisfaction with the Vietnamese working style, services, and infrastructure. They also have to deal with gender discrimination including problematic stereotypes of females in the STEM fields. Taking on the scholarships also brought about unexpected influences on these women's personal and love life.

However, overall these Fellows did not regret the decision they had made to pursue higher education in the U.S. More importantly they took action to tackle any challenges and confirm their position in the workplace and in the society. All participants of the research felt that the positive changes outweighed the challenges.

The research findings prove that women's empowerment might be achieved through education scholarships as part of development aid schemes. Development scholarships are not only

a means to enhance people's expertise in specific professional fields but from a gender perspective they are effective tools to promote and sustain the position of women participants. More importantly, the awards granted to women have compelling impacts on transforming not only the women recipients themselves but also other women and the wider community. Research findings also indicate that besides access to a more advanced education, living in a more developed and less patriarchal country and interacting with people coming from diverse backgrounds and cultures, also contributes to the empowerment process of these women. At the same time, the research suggests that scholarship programmes should pay more attention to supporting women participants when they return to their home country.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am truly grateful for having so much love, care, advice, and support from my supervisors, my friends and my beloved ones.

My sincerest thanks to my supervisors, Dr. Robyn Andrews and Dr. Regina Scheyvens, for their invaluable guidance, advice, corrections, patience and encouragement along the way. I am truly thankful to Dr. Robyn Andrews for her wisdom, gentleness and tolerance. I know she has put not only her head but also her heart into every question and comment she made as she reviewed my drafts. I have the greatest admiration for Dr. Regina Scheyvens for the endless inspiration and great leadership she has provided to all of us.

I would like to thank the female VEF Fellows who participated in my research. They spent their weekend time out of their extremely busy schedules talking with me and sharing so passionately about their VEF experience. Their rich and informative stories are extremely helpful to my research.

I am grateful for the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAid) for granting me the Scholarship so that I can pursue my Master's programme at Massey University and so that my family and I can experience first-hand the kiwi life. Thanks to Ms. Giang Nguyen and the NZAid Team at the New Zealand Embassy in Vietnam for conducting a transparent and impartial selection process so that I got a fair chance to further my study. Undoubtedly, the unflagging support from the International Student Support Team at Massey University including Sylvia Hooker, Jamie Hooper, Dave Broderick, Logan Tate, and many others was indispensable for me and my family during the past year and a half.

I am so blessed to have the wonderful companionship from Tracy, Dhita, Yurika, Laura and other classmates. Our friendship has sustained me through all the ups and downs of the study journey from the first semester until today. I know our paths will cross again one day.

My heartfelt thanks to Dr. Phuong Nguyen, my former supervisor and mentor at VEF, for her continued motivation and facilitation for me to further my education. Without her inspiration I would not have been able to pursue my graduate study.

Finally, I am in debt to my dear family, my husband, Dong, and my son, Jack (An Phuc) for their love and care. Their constant encouragement has made me strong enough to take on this interesting challenge. To my beloved parents, thank you for giving me this beautiful life; I hope I have made you proud.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

AAS	Australian Award Scholarship
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia)
GAD	Gender and Development
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HCMC	Ho Chi Minh City
IIE	Institute of International Education
ILO	International Labour Organization
MFAT	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (New Zealand)
MOLISA	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (Vietnam)
MOST	Ministry of Science and Technology (Vietnam)
NZAid	New Zealand Agency for International Development
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
Ph.D.	Doctor of Philosophy
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
U.S.	United States
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VEF	Vietnam Education Foundation
WB	World Bank



## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

### **1.1 Background to the research**

Development education scholarships have become a well-established development aid scheme offered to developing countries (Heyneman & Lee, 2016; Masterton, Moss, Korin, & Watters, 2014). Such scholarships provide education opportunities for the nationals of the recipient countries to pursue degree programmes most often at higher education level. The common purposes of this development aid scheme are to enhance the development in the recipient countries by training high quality human resources, to further enhance the influence of the scholarship providers on the developing countries, and to build the relationship between the donors and the scholarship recipient countries (AAS, 2016; NZAID, 2016; VEF, 2016b; Visser-Valfrey, Minford, & Cronin, 2010).

Vietnam, a developing country in Southeast Asia, has received education development support via scholarship programmes from a number of developed countries or international organizations for decades (AAS, 2016; Fulbright, 2016; NZAID, 2016; VEF, 2016b). Evaluations of these scholarship schemes, where they exist, are limited to quantitative assessments such as the number of graduates, degrees obtained, or professional promotions after graduation (VEF, 2012a; Visser-Valfrey et al., 2010). An assessment of how these scholarship programmes have influenced gender equality, particularly how these scholarships have impacted on women's empowerment - a critical component of development as identified in the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 (UN, 2000) and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 (UN, 2015) - is still under-studied. Education is understood as being a significant means for women's empowerment (N. P. Stromquist, 2002), therefore, it is valuable to explore how having the chance to pursue higher education via an international scholarship has contributed to the process of empowering women: My research will do this in the context of Vietnam.

On a personal note, I have a particular interest in the field of education development and its relation to women's empowerment. I have worked in the area of education development for almost eight years. Before moving from my homeland of Vietnam to New Zealand for my graduate study on a New Zealand AID Scholarship, I worked for the Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF, 2016b), a development scholarship programme operating in Vietnam. VEF is a U.S. Federal Government agency whose primary activity is to provide development scholarships to support Vietnamese nationals to pursue postgraduate degree studies (Master's or Ph.D.) in the United States. VEF's supported fields of study fall only within the disciplines of science, technology, engineering, and

maths, often known as the STEM fields. Since 2003, VEF has granted 571 fellowship awards to Vietnamese nationals, of whom 34% are women (VEF, 2016b). In my capacity as a VEF staff member, I interacted with the VEF Fellows very often and I have had a particular curiosity about the changes that participating in the VEF Fellowship has brought about to these Fellows, especially the female Fellows, not only in their professional but also in their personal lives.

With this background and interest, through this research I explore the impacts of the international development scholarships on women's empowerment drawing on the case study of the VEF Fellowship Programme and its female Fellows.

## **1.2 Justification for this research**

### **1.2.1 Brief overview of women's position in Vietnamese society**

Vietnam has historically been a patriarchal society which was immensely influenced by the regulations and philosophy of Confucianism (Goodkind, 1995). The inherited norms, values and practices from the Confucian traditions have stereotyped the images of Vietnamese men and women: While men are seen as the primary breadwinners and decision makers, women are expected to take primary responsibility for the housework and child care and at the same time maintain the harmony and happiness of the family and also contribute to the household income (Goodkind, 1995; Kabeer, Loi, & Anh, 2005).

Within this social and cultural context, Vietnamese families tend to prefer sons to daughters (Guilmoto, 2012; Haughton & Haughton, 1995). After marriage, the son and his wife will normally stay with his parents and carry on the family's traditions while daughter, after marriage, will move out to live with her in-law's family. Because of this norm, the disparity between boys and girls originates even in the family context. Investment in education for boys and girls is one of the manifestations of this disparity. Many parents believe that investment in education for their daughters is not a wise use of their resources since girls will get married and their departure to their husband's families after marriage will mean that all their skills and knowledge will benefit other families rather than their own (Liu, 2001). Nowadays, even though this inequality is less extreme than previously, girls and women in general are still in a more disadvantaged position than their male counterparts.

### **1.2.2 General picture of Vietnamese women's participation in higher education**

Recently, gender inequality has become one of the issues of concern to the Vietnamese government and other stakeholders, which has resulted in positive programmes and outcomes. Based on the Gender Inequality Index developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Vietnam has risen from the low middle-rank group in 1999 to the upper middle-rank group in 2008 (WB, 2011, p. 18). In 2011, according to the Vietnam Country Gender Assessment Report conducted by World Bank (ibid), Vietnam has made considerable progress in addressing gender disparities in education, employment, health and maternal mortality. In the area of education, the country has achieved extremely high levels of primary school enrolment for both boys and girls. The country achieved universal primary education in 2000. At tertiary education level, in 2011, women have caught up or surpassed men in terms of attaining junior college and university degrees.

However, at post-graduate level, gender disparities still persist. Based on a report by the Vietnam Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA/ILO, 2010), only 30.5% of Masters' degrees and 17.1% of PhDs were awarded to women in 2007. The lack of investment and encouragement from the family, marriage obligations, or cultural beliefs (for example, women with high levels of educational attainment will have less chance of getting married) might all have contributed to this gender disparity (ibid). Regardless of the reasons, this gap is indicative of the inequality that persists between women and men in higher education in Vietnam.

### **1.2.3 International development scholarship programmes in Vietnam**

After the end of the American war in 1975, Vietnam was left devastated by the war (V., 2015). Vietnamese people started to rebuild their country and it was then that other developed countries and development agencies chimed in to help the nation recover. Development aid in the form of scholarship schemes mostly at the post-graduate level is among the various types of support that have been rendered to Vietnam in training high quality human resources for the country. Some of the most popular and prestigious development scholarship programmes in the country include: The Australia Awards Programme which has awarded almost 6,000 scholarships to Vietnamese nationals (AAS, 2016); the U.S. Vietnam Education Foundation with almost 600 fellows (VEF, 2016b); the U.S. Fulbright Fellowship Programme with over 500 students (Fulbright, 2016) and the New Zealand Aid Programme with more than 200 awardees (NZASEAN, 2016).

While the application requirements of these programmes may vary, they share one thing in common: given the underrepresentation of women in post-graduate education and to promote gender equality in Vietnam, all of these programmes strongly encourage female applicants. Some

state that gender balance is taken into consideration in the selection process (MFAT, 2017a), some even give priority to women provided that all other qualifications are equal (VEF, 2016a). Through these programmes, many Vietnamese women have achieved their dreams of furthering their education, experiencing new cultures, and meeting with new people, an opportunity that they would have been otherwise denied without the support of such development schemes.

It is believed that participating in the scholarship programmes has brought about a variety of changes to these women. However, understanding these changes has not been the focus of much study. This research seeks to contribute to the knowledge about the impacts of the international development scholarships on the process of empowering its female participants in the Vietnamese context.

### **1.3 Research aims and questions**

#### **1.3.1 Research aims**

The overall aim of this research is to explore the potential impacts that the international development scholarship programmes have had on women's empowerment in the context of Vietnam, drawing on a case study of the VEF Fellowship Programme and its female Fellows.

#### **1.3.2 Research questions**

In order to achieve the research aim, the report seeks answers to the two following questions:

**Question 1:** What impacts if any has the VEF Fellowship had on the empowerment of the female Fellows in the context of Vietnam?

**Question 2:** Have the female VEF Fellows felt empowered by participating into the VEF Fellowship Programme and if so in what ways?

### **1.4 Methodology**

To answer these research questions, I have primarily used qualitative methods as this research aims at exploring a phenomenon, in this case the impacts of the development scholarship on women's empowerment. My goal is to generate rich and thick descriptions about the changes in women's lives and their sense of empowerment when they participate in the scholarship programme rather than generalise the findings, hence the use of this method (Stewart-Withers, Banks, McGregor, & Meo-Sewabu, 2014, p. 61). In addition, to complement the qualitative approach, I have also utilized quantitative data on the numbers of female VEF Fellows, the degree sought and achieved, and other relevant information. The latter was mostly based on available secondary data sources.

I have collected both primary and secondary data via semi-structured interviews and document analysis respectively. Semi-structured interviews, as the name suggests, according to O’Leary (2009) are “neither fully fixed nor fully free, interviewers generally start with some defined questioning plan, but pursue a more conversational style of interview that may see questions answered in an order more natural to the flow of conversation” (p.164). Meanwhile, document analysis refers to the “collection, review, interrogation, and analysis of various forms of text as a primary source of research data” (ibid) (ibid) (ibid) (ibid) (ibid) (ibid) (ibid) (ibid, p. 177). Since my research is desk-based and given the timeframe for a 60-credit research report, I was only able to interview via Skype five female VEF Fellows to learn about their personal experiences and hear their stories about the changes they have undergone since taking part in the VEF Fellowship Programme. The interview questions were constructed based on the women’s empowerment dimensions as introduced by Rowlands (1997) and Kabeer (1999) which will be discussed in the following chapters. Questions were asked to explore the Fellows’ sense of confidence, decision making ability, access to resources and opportunities, and their actions to give back to the community after participating in the VEF Fellowship Programme which are the core elements of the empowerment framework. Questions also captured the challenges and difficulties they had to tackle since joining the Programme providing a comprehensive insight into the programme’s impacts. Having worked for VEF for quite a few years, I could easily locate and access the publically available VEF publications and from those materials, select related secondary data which was helpful for my research.

#### **1.4.1 Ethical considerations**

I followed the in-house ethics process of Massey University when conducting this research. My project was evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. When conducting the interviews, I followed the procedure to seek the informed consent from the interviewees by developing an information sheet (Banks & Scheyvens, 2014, pp. 164-165). I explained to them the purpose of the study and my role in this research to clear any concern about the potential conflict of interest and reduce the level of discomfort or hesitation. I made it clear in the information sheet and in my introduction prior to the interviews that I had already resigned from VEF and this research was conducted to fulfil the requirements of my Master’s degree programme. So that they would not feel hesitant to share their candid feedback to me I emphasized that the research had no relation with my former role as VEF staff or with VEF as an organization. I assured them that their sharing during the interviews was used for the purpose of this research only. I also sought for their approval for every direct quote in the report. The interviewees were fully informed of how they were

selected to join the research. To encourage candid responses, I affirmed in writing and during the interviews that in the final research report, all interview responses would be confidential and that no names would be associated with any statement or information provided. To protect their identity, pseudonyms were used in the research. The respondents were also made aware that they might opt out of the interview at any time without any pressure and they might choose not to answer any questions that they felt uncomfortable with. Permission to record the interviews was also sought in advance of the interviews. To those who were interested in my research findings, I offered a summary of the findings when the project was written up.

As with data interpretation and writing up, the researcher's personal ethical and moral values have an important role to play. During the interviews and when analysing the data collected, I always reminded myself to "listen without judgement" (O'Leary, 2009, p. 36) because having worked for VEF for quite a few years and being a female scholarship recipient myself, the data interpretation may be affected by certain pre-judgements hence influencing the research's objectivity. In writing up, as De Vault (1999, pp. 189-190) warns I respected the true stories of the respondents and did not "impose a false unity" as after all the research though small-scale is to explore and contribute something new to the available body of knowledge

#### **1.4.2 Research participant selection process**

VEF has an annual publication entitled "*VEF Fellows, Alumni and Scholars: Achievements and Directory*" (VEF, 2017) which provides the list of all VEF grantees over the years making their personal, academic, work and contact information available to the public. Among 347 VEF Fellows who have completed their academic programmes in the U.S., more than 100 are females (ibid). To better reflect how the opportunity to participate into the scholarship programme has made impacts on their lives after they finish the programme, I only selected interviewees who have returned and worked in Vietnam for at least one year. This narrowed down the list of female VEF Fellows qualified for this research to roughly 50 people. Initially, I contacted a randomly selected group of five Fellows via email from this shortlist. Three of these accepted my invitation while others were too busy to commit their time. After that, I extended the invitation to two more and shortly had their agreement to join my research.

The interviews went smoothly although there were times I had to reschedule an interview with one Fellow twice due to technical issues and time conflicts. The shortest interview lasted about

45 minutes while the longest one took more than two hours. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese then I transcribed them into English.

### **1.4.3 Introduction to the research participants**

The five female VEF Fellows I interviewed have all completed their Master's or Ph.D./doctoral degree in the U.S. and they have now returned and resumed work in Vietnam. Among these five Fellows, four are single and one married after she returned to Vietnam. A brief description of the research participants is as follows:

The first Fellow is Lan Dang who completed her Master's degree in pharmaco-epidemiology in 2014 after two years in the U.S. on the VEF Fellowship. She returned to Vietnam in 2015 and since then has worked for multinational companies in Vietnam in the medical and healthcare area. Although there is not an absolute match between her current job and her field of study in the U.S, Lan said that the U.S. education has been very beneficial to her work

Trinh Le is completed her Ph.D. in biomedical sciences. She went to the U.S. in 2009 under the VEF Fellowship and returned to Vietnam in early 2016. Before going to the U.S., Trinh was a lecturer at a university and since coming back to Vietnam she has been working for a multi-national corporation with a branch in Vietnam specializing in family, personal and household care products. Due to her lack of work experience in the field, Trinh is now at the entry level at the company. Her work is not a particularly close match with her previous study in the U.S. but she can apply part of what she has learnt in the current job.

Minh Nguyen received a VEF Fellowship award in the year 2004 and completed her Doctor of Public Health Degree in the U.S. in 2009. After graduation, she spent almost two years working in the U.S. as part of her postdoctoral academic training programme. She returned to Vietnam in 2011 and for six years now has been back working in the public health sector. Currently, Minh is a Senior Strategic Information Officer at a medical project in Vietnam which is a collaboration between a U.S. medical university and two other foreign teaching hospitals. Her job is closely related to what she studied in the U.S. and she said she had been able to apply the knowledge and skills accumulated during her time in the U.S. in the current job.

Lyli Nguyen is the fourth Fellow I interviewed. She is now an Associate Professor at an international university. Lyli received the VEF Fellowship to pursue her Ph.D. degree in chemistry in 2004. After five years, she completed her degree and worked for a research lab in the U.S. for

almost two years before returning to Vietnam in 2010. She is pleased to be working in academia and said that the U.S. education has been very helpful to her job. At the university, she teaches courses which are close to her research area in the U.S. On a personal life note, Lyli is the only one among the five research participants who married and she has two children after she came back to Vietnam.

The last interviewee I spoke with is Hong Truong who is also the newest returnee of the five Fellows. She came back to Vietnam in mid-2016 after completing a two-year Master's degree in the U.S. in construction engineering. Hong is now working as a Green Building Project Manager for a French construction company. Her study in the U.S., which was in the field of Green Building, served as the foundation for her to apply for and carry out this job.

Although their backgrounds are different, all the five Fellows had the same expectations when they applied to the VEF Fellowship to study in the U.S. They all found that the knowledge and skills in the field they had at the time were not sufficient for them to carry out their job or to work independently in their field. This is even more the case for the three Ph.D. Fellows. Before studying in the U.S., they all worked as lecturers at different universities in Vietnam and a common comment from these Fellows was that they did not feel confident to teach their students while they only had limited understanding of their fields. As lecturers, they were also under pressure to pursue a Ph.D. degree to meet the requirements for the post. Expectations from supervisors, colleagues, and students collectively put pressure on these women, urging them to study further.

For these women, pursuing their graduate degree programmes in the U.S. was the first choice to achieve that goal as they all believed that the U.S. was the leading place to study science and technology. In addition, they chose the U.S. for its cultural diversity since as young people (all were in their 20s when they first went to the U.S.) they wanted to meet with people from different parts of the world. These combined reasons served as the motivation for them to apply for the VEF Fellowship.

#### **1.4.4 Limitations of the research**

The research report has been conducted within one semester so due to the timeframe there may be some oversights and limitations. The research participants are VEF Fellows who pursued their post-graduate degree programmes in the U.S. in the STEM fields. Therefore, their experiences and stories will not necessarily reflect those of other women studying in other fields of study in



other countries. Also, due to limited time and resources, only five interviewees were selected to take part in the research. As such, research findings reflect the experiences and stories of the interviewees only and do not represent those of other female VEF Fellows and of female scholarship recipients of other schemes. However, it offers insights into a particular social phenomenon. Furthermore, even though I have explained my research purpose and clarified that my current role as a Master's student and my former role as a staff member of the VEF Fellowship Programme are separate, there might still be certain influence that may affect the answers to my interview questions. However, overall I am confident that I have interpreted and presented their stories and experiences in the most accurate way possible.

## **1.5 Report overview**

This research report consists of seven chapters in which Chapter One introduces the research, Chapters Two, Three and Four are written based upon literature reviews and document analysis, Chapters Five and Six present and discuss the research findings and Chapter Seven concludes the report.

*Chapter One* has served as the introduction to the study. Education scholarships are presented as a form of foreign development aid to developing countries including Vietnam. A brief overview of women's position in traditional Vietnamese society and their participation in higher education are sketched to serve as the background for the study of women's position in Vietnam and to understand how international scholarship programmes could serve as a means for women's empowerment. The research aims and questions are also presented along with the research methodology, ethics issues, introduction of research participants and research limitations.

*Chapter Two* provides a theoretical overview of the conceptual approaches to power and empowerment to understand how they have been defined and conceptualized especially in development discourse. The chapter further discusses a select number of empowerment frameworks as presented by leading empowerment authors including Kabeers, Rowland and Moser. By doing so, the chapter illustrates how empowerment is experienced and demonstrated and describes the various dimensions of empowerment. It also touches upon the position of empowerment in development interventions, the roles of development agencies, actors and NGOs including development scholarship programmes, in facilitating the empowerment process.

*Chapter Three* explores the roles education has played in facilitating the process of women's empowerment. It also lays out the obstacles interfering with women's empowerment

regardless of their education attainment. Based on available studies, the chapter also reviews how and to what extent international development scholarships have changed the lives of the women who participate in these education exchange programmes.

*Chapter Four* provides an overview of VEF and introduces the VEF Fellowship as a scholarship programme which is used as the case study for my research. The Chapter also includes general information of the women participants of the VEF Fellowship Programme.

*Chapter Five* presents the research findings and discusses the positive impacts of participating in the VEF Fellowship Programme on the female VEF Fellows in relation to empowerment theory which is discussed in the literature review chapters.

*Chapter Six* on the other hand describes the difficulties and challenges that these women have to deal with when they come back to Vietnam after their study in the U.S. which creates hurdles for their empowerment.

*Chapter Seven* serves as the conclusion for the research report confirming that education scholarships as part of development aid have facilitated the empowerment process of the women participants. The Chapter also includes implications of the research and make recommendations for further studies.

## **Chapter 2: Empowerment Framework and Women's Empowerment**

### **2.1 Introduction**

To explore the impacts of development scholarships on women's empowerment, first and foremost, it is essential to understand what is meant by the terms power and empowerment, and why women's empowerment matters. This chapter provides a theoretical overview of power and the concept of empowerment to see how they have been defined especially in development discourse. The chapter further discusses a select number of empowerment frameworks as presented by empowerment literature. By doing so, the chapter illustrates how empowerment is experienced and demonstrated and describes the various dimensions of empowerment. As women's empowerment in Vietnam is the focus of this research, this chapter also elaborates on why women's empowerment matters and provides an overview of the status of women's empowerment in the context of Vietnam.

### **2.2 Conceptual approach to power and empowerment**

Before one can fully understand the concept of "empowerment", it is necessary to discuss the meaning of its root term "power". There are various ways of understanding "power": some are negative while other are positive. The most commonly known and instrumental usage of power is the ability to control people or things (Dictionary, 2007; Stevenson, 2010). Based on this definition, power is seen as a means to influence others and to exert control over others so that they become obedient. In this sense, power is a binary and hierarchical concept which is a form of domination and is a means to influence others to one's advantage (Scheyvens, 2009, p. 464). Rowlands (1997) calls this kind of power "power over" and describes it as "zero-sum" or the "finite supply" of power: the more power one person has, the less another has. Exerting this kind of power can be seen in different contexts ranging from within the family, in the social relations, in the military, in the corporate sector, to national and international relations. Looking at power this way entails an understanding that the stronger dominates and takes control over the weaker. Also according to Rowlands (1995), "power over" in extreme form can be expressed as threat or violence and it normally entails conflicts. She adds that a gender analysis of the use of power interpreted this way shows that power is used predominantly by men over other men and by men over other women (Rowlands, 1997, p. 11). What is also shown is that if women gain power, it will be at men's expense (ibid).

When “empowerment” is constructed drawing on the “power over” meaning of the concept, empowering someone can make others lose their control and power. As an example, men’s fear of losing control may hinder the empowerment of women (Rowlands, 1997).

However, in development discourse, power is viewed more positively as a productive and enabling force (Scheyvens, 2009). Development researchers elaborate the various manifestations of power. Rowlands (1997) mentions a variety of forms of power including “power to”, “power with”, and “power from within” as follows:

- **“Power to:** *a generative and productive form of power which created new possibilities and actions without domination*
- **Power with:** *a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together or the power of collective action*
- **Power from within:** *the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us and makes us truly human and a sense of self-belief which leads to confidence to seek changes which could improve one’s life” (ibid, p. 13).*

These notions of power in development discourse also lead to different perceptions of empowerment. When power is associated with “power to” and “power with”, empowerment is seen as a process that leads people to perceive themselves as able (Rowlands, 1997). When becoming empowered, people are aware that they have the capability and right to act and influence decisions. As with power that comes from within, empowerment means people become self-conscious of their status and gain self-confidence to make their own decisions and lead the changes to enhance their life and well-being (ibid).

Kabeer, who is well-known for her work on women’s empowerment (1999), argues that the ability to make choices is central to the concept of power. Therefore, according to her, empowerment is a process of change in which people who were previously denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability (ibid, p. 437). Yet, it is necessary to make it clear that people who exercise a great deal of choice in their lives may be very powerful, but they are not empowered, in the sense the term is used because they were never disempowered (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14).

What needs to be emphasized is that both Rowlands and Kabeer view empowerment as a process of change that comes from within for those who were marginalized and disempowered in

the first place. In other words, empowerment is not given from one to another but is the internal capacity and confidence that the oppressed and marginalized gain, regain or build up for themselves, or as John Friedmann words it “genuine empowerment can never be conferred from the outside” (1992, p. 77). Scheyvens’ definition of empowerment is also built upon the idea of power that comes from within when she says:

*Empowerment means activation of the confidence and capabilities of previously disadvantaged or disenfranchised individuals or groups so that they can exert greater control over their lives, mobilize resources to meet their needs, and work to achieve social justice* (Scheyvens, 2009, p. 464).

Cornwall and Edwards (2014, p. 7) who discuss the role of external factors in the empowerment process, use the metaphor of a journey along pathways. In that journey, people can travel on their own or with others but the work and interventions of other actors in their journey of change cannot be conceived as empowering them. Rather these actors clear obstacles from the path for them as empowerment is not done to people but by them, for themselves. Also in agreement with this, Scheyvens argues that “development agencies cannot empower someone who is marginalized or disadvantaged but only facilitate empowerment” (2009, p. 464). This understanding of empowerment and the roles of external actors in the empowerment process will serve as the guidelines for the understanding of education and development scholarships in the process of women’s empowerment.

### **2.3 Women’s empowerment as a focus in development interventions**

As presented above, empowerment is an important aspect of development for social groups which face disadvantages or are disempowered in the first place. Disempowerment could result from such phenomena as ethnicity, class, age, religion, or especially gender (Scheyvens, 2009, p. 469). Women in many cultures and societies especially in the developing countries are among those most likely to be marginalized.

Kabeer (1994) argues that women are not just dependent, passive beneficiaries, rather they are actors albeit with social constraints which limit choices and possibilities. In the context of developing countries, women’s roles are often described as subordinate and inferior. Cohen (2006, p. 261) writes that exploitation and abuse of women is so often acceptable in developing countries where women have an inferior social status through customary or formal law. Women in some

contexts also have to deal with several forms of subjugation including denial of property rights, dowry-related problems, lack of legal protection, or exploitation of under-age girls through marriage and labour arrangements (ibid).

The concept of women's empowerment has emerged since the 1980s and 1990s as a radical approach which involves transforming power relations in favour of women's rights and towards greater gender equality (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014, p. 3). Kabeer and Rowlands, whose concepts will be introduced and drawn on extensively in my report, have been among the major advocates and promoters of women's empowerment during this period.

Besides, other advocates include Gita Sen and Caren Grown, who in 1987 wrote *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives* which is one of the most cited books on women's empowerment in the Third World. The book presents visions for a better future for the peoples of the world, a future free of oppression based on gender, class or ethnicity. Meanwhile, Moser (1989) emphasizes the role of "empowerment approach" as the most effective approach to Gender and Development (GAD).

GAD advocates argue that women's empowerment is a powerful determinant of their own, their children's, their families' and the society's well-being at large (Shobha, Geetu, & Preeti, 2016). Due to this, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from 2000 to 2015 (UN, 2000) dedicated the third goal to promoting gender equality and empowering women especially by education means which aimed to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015. They also saw education as the pathway to empowerment. In September 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015), which were introduced to replace the expired MDGs, once again emphasized gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment. The fifth SGD stated that women and girls must be provided with equal access to education, health care, decent work, and representation in political and economic decision-making processes, which will fuel sustainable economies and benefit societies and humanity. Together with the United Nations state members, international development organizations have also been committed to leveraging women's empowerment in their action plans. For example, CARE (2017) works comprehensively in all aspects from education universalization, poverty and hunger eradication to ending domestic violence and child marriage in order to achieve the women's empowerment mission. The collective global efforts to address women's empowerment indicate that women's empowerment has become a focus of the development agenda worldwide.

## **2.4 Women's empowerment in Vietnam**

Gender inequality is prevalent in many countries and the problem is further deepened in patriarchal societies such as Vietnam in which women generally have a lower position in family and social settings (Goodkind, 1995; Kabeer et al., 2005). Women's empowerment is a foreign concept which has been brought to the country by international development organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2010), International Labour Office (ILO, 2012), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID, 2016) to name just a few. As an example, women's empowerment is among USAID's missions in Vietnam which aims at ensuring Vietnamese women's voices are represented, their needs are addressed, and their leadership potential are fostered (2016).

Since women's empowerment is quite a new concept in Vietnam, understanding and applying the term requires some specific indicators. Effort to set some indicators to measure women's empowerment in some fields in Vietnam has been recognized. As an instance in the reproductive health area, Diana Santillán et al. (2004) recommend a set of domains to assess women's empowerment in the socio-economic spheres including: *production* (where women could be seen to make strategic choices affecting their families' economic welfare), *housework* (with the aim of sharing housework between men and women in the family), *family expenditure* (with women gaining access to resources and can control how these resources are spent), *relationships with natal relatives*, *community participation* and *rights of husbands and wives in the family*.

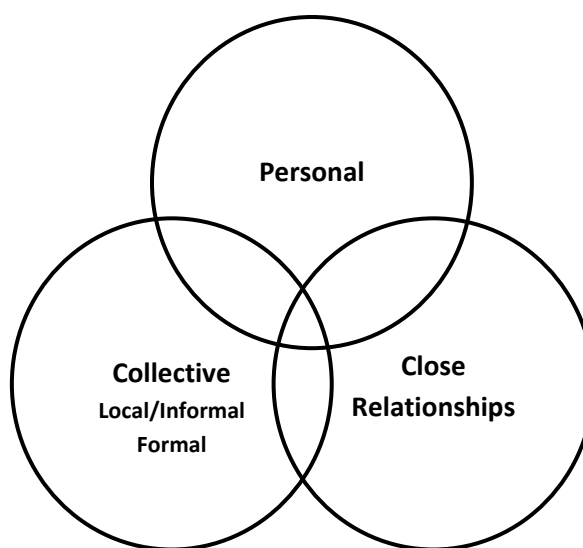
In this report, rather than using the above indicators, I will refer to the different dimensions of empowerment based upon Rowlands' and Kabeer's frameworks which will be discussed below as the foundation for the empowerment theory for my research.

## **2.5 Conceptual approach to empowerment frameworks**

Even though the concept of empowerment may be defined, still it remains abstract and intangible so requires further exploration. The development researchers who conceptualize empowerment have used different dimensions and measurements to visualize this concept as I now elaborate with the two I have found to be the most useful and relevant to my focus.

According to Rowlands (1995, 1997), empowerment has three dimensions which are known as "*personal*", "*close relationship*" or "*relational*", and "*collective*" dimensions. Empowerment in the personal dimension is the process of developing a sense of self and individual

confidence and capacity (Rowlands, 1995, p. 87). According to Rowlands, it refers to a person's self-awareness and self-realization of the personal strengths, identity and ability to confront oppression and inequality. This is the power that comes from within each individual encouraging them to make the changes to improve their situation. The “relational dimension” of empowerment refers to the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decisions made within it (ibid). Empowerment in this dimension is presented through the bargaining capability to determine the boundaries of a relationship. The “collective dimension” is where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone (ibid). This includes collective action based on cooperation rather than competition. Collective action may be locally focused, within a small community, or on a broader scale such as national networks. These three dimensions of empowerment may support and complement each other as illustrated in Figure 1.



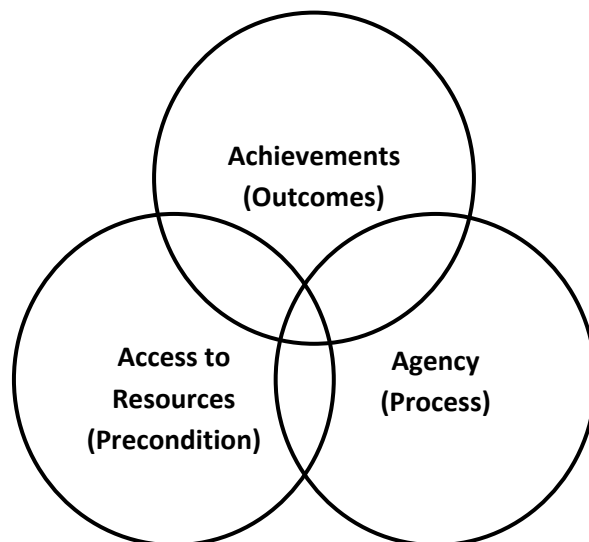
**Figure 1: Three dimensions of empowerment (Rowlands, 1997, p. 14)**

In the context of education, especially higher education for women as the focus of this research, some reference can be made to Rowland's three dimensions of empowerment. When women obtain access to higher education, especially to an advanced level, their knowledge and skills will be further enhanced, which also boosts their inner capability, self-confidence and awareness. In this way their “personal dimension” is strengthened. Once they have more knowledge, skills and self-confidence, their ability to interact with others, to negotiate and make decisions in relationship with others will be better, and their voice will be heard. In other words, it affects the “relational dimension” or “close relationships dimension” of empowerment.



Collectively, when these women work together and cooperate with each other in sharing what they have achieved through education, the results will be even more impactful. For instance, if women with appropriate educational backgrounds in the areas of productive and maternity health work together to support other women, their “collective” action would reach out to a larger community and function more effectively than if they work individually.

Kabeer (1999, p. 437), who views empowerment as the ability to exercise choice, also sees empowerment manifested in three inter-related dimensions: “*resources*” (*pre-condition*), “*agency*” (*process*) and “*achievements*” (*outcomes*). The “resource” dimension of empowerment does not only refer to the material resources but also to the human and social ones which serve to enhance the ability to make choices. The “agency” dimension is the ability to define one’s goals and act on them; it focuses on the sense of agency and encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose of a person’s activity and “power within” rather than the visible actions. The “achievement” dimension refers to the meaningful choices that individuals have made and the extent to which their potential is realised or fails to be realised, or the outcomes of people’s efforts (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15). The three dimensions that empowerment can entail can be seen as representing the pathways through which these processes of empowerment can occur. Changes in any one dimension can lead to changes in others (*ibid*, p. 15) and they are three indivisible aspects of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999, p. 29).



**Figure 2: Three dimensions of empowerment (N. Kabeer, 1999)**

The main focus of this research on education and women's empowerment can be related to Kabeer's connection between education and empowerment. According to her, "education increases the likelihood that women will look after their own well-being along with that of their family" and "education appears to increase women's capacity to deal with the outside world, including government officials and service providers of various kinds" (Kabeer, 2005, pp. 16-17). Education can assist women in gaining access to information, opportunities or networks which are the resources needed for the empowerment process. Educated women may feel more confident and increase the power from within or their sense of agency. To that end, women achieve not only by taking part in education programmes but also by making better choices thanks to the skills and knowledge they are equipped with.

What is noteworthy is that both Rowlands and Kabeer use similar language and diagrams to illustrate their empowerment frameworks. Each presents the composition of empowerment by the term "dimension" and these dimensions are inter-related and complementary to one another. Throughout my report, Rowlands' and Kabeer's empowerment frameworks with their different dimensions are particularly helpful for the analysis of the roles of education and international development scholarships in women's empowerment which will be discussed in the chapters that follow.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the theoretical approaches to power, empowerment and women's empowerment frameworks. The discussion has highlighted that empowerment is rooted from "power from within" which cannot be bestowed from the outside but rather it is a process that leads people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions (Rowlands, 1997, p. 14), or it is a process of changes in which people who were previously denied the ability to make choice acquire such an ability (N. Kabeer, 1999). These arguments from development researchers help affirm that empowerment is part of a process to enable disadvantaged or marginalized people to play a larger role in society. The empowerment of one group of people does not dis-empower other groups so it is not a zero-sum practice. From a gender perspective, the empowerment of women does not mean it makes men feel less powerful and in fact everyone can feel empowered together. The roles of development agencies, actors and NGOs including development scholarship programmes are to facilitate the empowerment process of the disadvantaged who were previously deprived of the rights to make choices. These foundational understandings of "power", "empowerment" and the dimensions of empowerment frameworks will help shed light on further

analysis of education as well as the roles of the development scholarship programmes in facilitating the empowerment process of its women participants which will be discussed in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 3 Education, Development Scholarships and Women's Empowerment**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the roles education has played in facilitating the process of women's empowerment especially in the context of developing countries. Since higher education is the focus of my research report, education at the tertiary level and its impacts on women's empowerment will be discussed in this chapter. Based on available research, the chapter will also review how, and to what extent, international development scholarships have changed the lives of the women who participate in these education exchange programmes. Combined with the discussion of empowerment in Chapter Two, the chapter will serve as the foundation to understand the impacts of participating in the VEF Fellowship Programme on the empowerment process of the female Fellows.

### **3.2 Education and women's empowerment**

As previously mentioned, women are more likely than men to be in subordinate positions especially in patriarchal societies (Goodkind, 1995; Kabeer, Loi, & Anh, 2005). Women's empowerment has therefore become a significant goal of international development programmes to help them overcome their marginalized status. As empowerment is involved with the power that comes from within each individual, as earlier defined in Chapter Two, several factors are considered in activating that internal power and to promote women's empowerment. These factors include, but are not limited to, access to financial resources, health and medical services, information, knowledge, participation in social organizations, access to the process of decision making, and especially access to education (Friedmann, 1992, p. 33). They collectively work to bolster the self-confidence and the sense of personal potency within each individual. The following sections will discuss the impacts that education has had on women's empowerment by looking at both the positive outcomes as well as some limitations that still hinder women's empowerment regardless of their education attainments.

#### **3.2.1 The positive impacts of education on women's empowerment**

Literature on the roles of education in women's empowerment indicates that education is a powerful means for the process of achieving women's empowerment. Stromquist (2002, p. 22) considers education to be one of the keys to women's empowerment, emphasizing that knowledge

brought about by both formal and non-formal education helps “widen people’s mental horizons, enabling them to see both larger pictures and more detailed accounts of social phenomena” (2015, p. 313). What can be interpreted from Stromquist’s argument is that the knowledge generated from education helps to raise women’s awareness of their oppressed status and encourages them to confront the oppressive elements and free them of their dependency. The opinion that education serves as an enabling force for empowerment is also stressed by Freire in his well-known book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000). He promotes the role of education as a practice of freedom for men and women in the transformation of their world:

*Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world* (2000, p. 34).

Other literature that also builds on the ideas that education is an effective way to help improve women’s empowerment includes Murphy-Graham who sees education as a tool to expand women’s opportunities to live meaningful lives (2012, p. 13). Winthrop and Sperlings in their book *What Works in Girls’ Education* (2015) comment that the most rewarding way of looking at the role of education in women’s empowerment is the generative cycle of girls’ education (2015, p. 13). When a girl who would have been denied an education receives a quality education, it starts a positive cycle of education and empowerment from mother to daughter, generation after generation. Also according to Winthrop and Sperlings, better-educated women are more empowered ones: “When girls go to school, they develop into women who have more say over their lives, are less likely to be subject to domestic violence, participate more in decision making in households, and have an increased sense of their own worth and efficacy” (ibid, p. 18). Malala Yousafzai, a 2014 Peace Nobel Laureate and a strong young activist for female education, expresses in the foreword of the book *What Works in Girls’ Education* that empowered girls and women can transform the world and that can only be achieved if girls can have access to education (ibid, p. xix). These authors agree on one point: education can serve as the catalyst for women’s empowerment.

Specifically, taking the empowerment framework of Rowlands (1997, p. 15) which has been analysed in Chapter Two as an example, the positive impacts of education on women’s empowerment are reflected in the three dimensions of empowerment namely personal, relational and collective dimensions. These dimensions will be looked into detail in the following sections.

Various studies have found that education has activated women's self-confidence, self-determination and self-awareness which is a manifestation of the "*personal dimension*" of women's empowerment. Research examining the effect of higher education on women's lives and women's empowerment in a patriarchal society such as Pakistan has concluded that education is the most important factor for enhancing women's confidence and awareness of their rights (Noureen, 2015, p. 19). In other research, also in the context of a developing country, Sudha, writer of *Gender Roles* (2000) interviewed 400 respondents in India where the majority (93%) agree that education enables women to improve their status by helping them to develop self-respect and self-confidence, and the "honour of being educated" makes them proud (2000, pp. 207-208).

In terms of the "*relational dimension*" of empowerment, studies have indicated that education is an effective means to enable women in their decision making ability, and improve their position in family, at work, and in the wider society. According to Kabeer (1999, pp. 447-448), in South Asia, gender inequality is prominent in the area of decision making. Within a family context, for example, women usually can only decide on small-value household consumption. More strategic and important decisions such as education and marriage of children, or transactions of big value assets fall within the decision making realm of men. However, research shows that a number of educated women have been given due respect and become more equal partners in the decision-making process (Noureen, 2015, p. 13). According to the same source, the author has also concluded that education has important effects on women's increased decision making, becoming valued family members and learning to negotiate with husbands, in-laws and others in the community (ibid, p. 316). Supporting this is an example from research by World Bank in 2014 which reports that from an analysis of 52 developing countries, 43% of women without an education cannot make simple decisions such as visits to friends and family compared with 17% of those with a higher education (Klugman et al., 2014, p. 15).

Available literature claims that educated women are gaining a better position in the family and in society which is another representation of the "*relational dimension*". Noreen and Khalid (2012, p. 69) argue that education can play a vital role in enhancing the status of women even moving them to an equal position with their partners in the family. Research conducted by Erin Murphy-Graham (2010) finds that education equips women with interpersonal, negotiation and communication skills to encourage their partners to share household responsibilities with them.

Studies also show that a higher level of education offers women better employment opportunities. Education opens up more occupational options for women. Instead of working in the

agricultural sector doing manual work, women with an education can partake in the formal sector which provides them with wages and more benefits (Winthrop & Sperling, 2015, p. 27). With education, women from low income countries, middle-income countries and the developed countries have proven to have better professional positions and wages (ibid, pp. 24-28). Education has given them the opportunities they would otherwise never have been able to obtain.

With regard to the position of women in the political sphere or their position in society, according to Klugman et al. (2014, p. 23), worldwide, women account for less than 22% of parliamentarians and fewer than 5% of mayors. A valid way to boost women's participation in political leadership positions is through education. Studies have found that better-educated women are more likely to participate in political decision making (Winthrop & Sperling, 2015, p. 55).

Gaining better positions in the family and society, having more professional opportunities and gaining political leadership positions are manifestations of the "*relational dimension*" of women's empowerment. As such, research findings from available studies imply that education plays an important role in bolstering this dimension of women's empowerment.

In terms of the "*collective dimension*" of the empowerment framework, research also suggests that thanks to access to education, women and girls have worked collectively to make positive impacts and changes in their societies. In a context where cultural and social values reinforce gender inequalities, individual efforts alone can hardly change the whole structural constraints. Noreen (2015, pp. 18-19) believes that education has transformed women into agents of change and thanks to education the target of women's empowerment at the society level can be achieved. Meanwhile according to Moradi Sheykhjan, Rajeswari, and Jabari (2014, p. 47), empowerment of women through education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the most important tool that can help break the pattern of gender discrimination and bring lasting change for women in developing countries.

The collective empowerment dimension of women is built up and further enhanced by the improvements in the personal and relational dimensions. The more women become aware of their own rights, become self-confident and gain better positions in the family, workplace, and society, the more they work together to eliminate gender bias and inequality. Multiple cross-country studies such as the one led by the World Bank (Klugman et al., 2014) concludes that "education is particularly powerful in helping women overcome unequal and oppressive social limits and expectations so they can make choices about their lives." One of the major findings in Malik and

Courtney's (2011) research on the relationship between higher education and women's empowerment shows that "participation in higher education enables women to impact on discriminatory practices simultaneously and thereby effect change for the better" (pp. 38-39). Individual empowerment has led to collective empowerment and in that process, education has an important role to play.

### **3.2.2 Limitations and challenges influencing women's empowerment**

However, research has proven that it remains superficial to say that education is the panacea for women's empowerment. Although education has contributed profoundly in reinforcing women's positions at home, at work and in the society, still there are cultural and social norms rooted so deeply in people's thinking and attitudes that obstruct gender equality.

Some critical reviews of the status of educated women have found that education alone is not sufficient for women to rectify their oppressed circumstance. In Indonesia for instance, local customary norms still govern many parts of the country. In the family context, for example, husbands have the right to ask their wives to stay at home to be housewives (Samarakoon & Parinduri, 2015, p. 440). Living in such communities, educated women have little choice but to abide by the local traditions and they might be challenged to give up their aspiration to seek employment outside their home.

At work and in societal context, regardless of gaining a stronger voice and more important positions, there is still a distinct gap between them and their male counterparts. A report by OECD (2014), on Japan for example states that women make up the majority of the skilled population who are out of the labour market. While 5% of men with tertiary education are not employed, 32% of women with the same levels of education and skills are not in the workforce. The rate of employment among Japanese women remains considerably lower than men with the same level of education; 69% and 92% respectively among women and men with university or advanced research degree. When it comes to the wage gap, women with a tertiary education in Japan earn only 48% of the income of men with similar levels of education (OECD, 2014). In some extreme cases, women's education level is not directly proportional to their employment opportunities. In Sri Lanka there exists a paradox that "highly educated women not only have difficulty getting jobs, but also the returns on financial power in the family begin to diminish at higher levels of schooling". Class and ethnic identities influence women's employability rather than their educational attainment (Malhotra & Mather, 1997, pp. 626-627).



In Vietnam, research has captured gender disparity in employability among university graduates, and promotion opportunities among university instructors and administrators (Petrochenkov & Nguyen, 2015). Female and male graduates at the same education level have different chances of gaining employment just because of gender difference. In the field of agricultural science and construction, for example, the employability of the female graduates is much lower than that of male counterparts as they are regarded to be physically weaker and it is considered inappropriate to travel and work in the fields or the construction sites (ibid, pp. 16-17). In terms of promotions, while the majority of the instructors interviewed for the research (87%) agree that males and females have equal opportunities, 13% of the female instructors and 5% male instructors do not think that women have the same opportunity to be promoted. The difference reveals a significant sign of gender inequality in the academic sector regardless of the equal education level between the two genders.

Research even points out that teaching materials sometimes emphasise gender disparity, so having access to education and schooling is not always synonymous with increasing women's empowerment. For instance in Vietnam, boys are presented in textbooks, particularly in illustrations, as "strong, masculine, leaders, able to use modern technology, able to work hard, interested in challenging and competitive sports", while girls are presented as "singing and dancing, able to use household equipment and do housework" (WB, 2011, p. 28). Curriculum design and the contents of textbooks sometimes contribute to the perpetuation of gender bias in the education system (S. Malik & K. Courtney, 2011, p. 40; Taylor, 2003). There is a dominance of boys and men in the school textbooks and they are described in "traditional gender roles" (Ullah & Skelton, 2013). When women and girls are referred to, their images are often imbedded with the 3 Cs "cooking, cleaning and child rearing" while men are illustrated with outdoor activities and in positions that carry authority and power (Başak & Birsen, 2016; Kimmel, 2013). These stereotypes unintentionally discourage girls from breaking through the "glass ceiling" that limits their potential. In such cases, the efforts to reduce gender inequality and empower women through education could trigger unexpected negative effects.

### **3.3 Development scholarships and women's empowerment**

Education development scholarships granted by foreign governments or development agencies to nationals of the developing countries have been a popular type of development aid. As claimed by these scholarship programmes, the objectives of these aid schemes are to "empower individuals with the knowledge, skills and qualifications to contribute to the economic, social, and

political development” (MFAT, 2015) or in the case of the Australian Award Scholarships to “assist the development and employment of a highly-skilled workforce and to promote women’s economic empowerment” in developing countries (DFAT, 2015). In Vietnam, New Zealand Agency of International Development, Australian Awards Scholarships, U.S. Fulbright Scholarship Programme and U.S. VEF Fellowship are among the most prominent higher education development scholarships. These programmes offer full scholarships for Vietnamese nationals to study Master’s or Ph.D. degree programmes in the host countries and recipients of these scholarships are required to return and work in Vietnam for at least two years on completion.

Research has been conducted to study the relationship between education development scholarships and gender relations and gender related issues. Specifically, a number of studies have explored the outcomes of development scholarships by looking at the influences it has on women’s lives. Research by Wild (2007), for example, examined on the relationship between aid, education, and the impacts of the international development scholarship scheme on Thai women’s lives. In her research findings, Wild identifies a number of positive and negative outcomes for women associated with this type of educational experience:

*Beneficial outcomes include greater emotional autonomy, increased cross-cultural knowledge, new professional networks, new work skills, and improved English-language competency. Participants within this research report that these benefits have translated into increased respect within their workplaces; new opportunities to represent their organisations at home and abroad; greater participation in international research and policy forums; increased control over negotiations with foreign consultants; and an enhanced commitment to collaboration with other professionals in the ASEAN region. Negative outcomes to arise out of the scholarship experience include role tension and relationship conflict for married women; career disruption associated with employment bonding and job restructuring during the period of absence abroad; new unwanted work responsibilities; and dissatisfaction with some aspects of quality of life in their country of origin. (Wild, 2007, p. ii)*

The study reveals that while taking up international scholarship opportunities has changed the lives of these women positively, there are still challenges they have to overcome especially those which are gender related.

In addition, Spark’s study on *Understanding the Barriers that Confront Educated Women in Papua New Guinea* (2010) has also suggested that while Papua New Guinean women benefit

from participation in higher education, especially from the education opportunities offered by the Australian Awards Scholarships (AAS), “this participation is not enough to bring changes in the way that would seriously enhance the status of women” in the country. Women still have to face multiple barriers particularly those of male jealousy and anxiety about educated women as competitors, female jealousy and suspicion about educated women’s opportunities and morality, as well as active discrimination against educated women (ibid, p.28).

Other studies on the impacts of the AAS on women participants have indicated that the scholarships have been a very effective tool for building women’s leadership by equipping them with the professional skills for their career advancement as well as developing the personal attributes, vision and range of skills needed for leadership. Yet, in many cases, the women have not been able to optimize their full potential due to social restrictions and cultural beliefs in their home countries (Lockley, Ovington, & Shah, 2015). In Indonesia, the AAS scholarship has made some progress towards gender equality but “considerable gender bias and disparity still persist as a result of hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender” (Edmunds, 2007).

From these research findings, it can be inferred that the scholarships and the cross-cultural life experiences have equipped these women with new skills and knowledge, and changed them into more confident and well-rounded figures. However, these scholarships do not automatically empower these women given the social norms and constraints they have to deal with.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

A number of studies indicate that education is one of the key factors facilitating the process of women’s empowerment, enabling them to be more self-confident, have more voice in decision making, and sustain their position in the family, at work, and in society. However, research also suggests that education is not the magic bullet to make women feel more empowered. Women with higher education still have to deal with hurdles related to customs, norms and traditions which challenge their empowerment. This mixture of both opportunities and challenges holds true for women who take up development scholarships to study abroad, as found, for example, by Wild (2007). They may have more respect, new opportunities, greater inclusion, and increased control but at the same time also encounter role tension, relationship conflict, career disruption, new unwanted work responsibilities, and dissatisfaction with their lives in their home countries.

Before examining the case study of the VEF Fellowship and its female fellows to explore the possible impacts of international development scholarship on Vietnamese women's empowerment, the following chapter will introduce this particular programme in more detail.

## **Chapter 4 VEF and the VEF Fellowship Programme**

### **4.1 Introduction**

As a developing country in Southeast Asia, Vietnam has received development aid from developed countries and international development agencies for decades. Development aid schemes come in many shapes and forms ranging from financial support for poverty alleviation, health care provision, illiteracy reduction, to human capital training (DFAT, 2017; MFAT, 2017b; USAID, 2016). International development education scholarships have been considered as one way to help Vietnam boost high quality human resources. In most cases, participants of the scholarship programmes are awarded a grant to pursue higher education study in the host countries and upon the completion of their academic programmes, they come back and work in Vietnam.

As mentioned earlier, the VEF Fellowship Programme which funds Vietnamese students to go to the United States for Master's or Ph.D. degree is among the most prestigious international scholarship schemes awarded to Vietnamese nationals. In fact, the aspiration to study in the United States is a growing trend among Vietnamese students especially those born to affluent families who aim to pursue higher education overseas (IIE, 2016). Rather than focus on the already affluent, VEF awards full scholarships to Vietnamese nationals based on merit and academic performance enabling students from different backgrounds to pursue higher education degrees in the United States. Among hundreds of VEF Fellows are many young talented female students.

This chapter will provide an overview of VEF and the VEF Fellowship Programme as well as sketch general ideas of who the female participants of the Fellowship are, which is necessary in order to fully understand the discussions and analysis of the research findings in the chapters that follow.

### **4.2 VEF Overview**

In the year 2000, after the visit to Vietnam by former President Bill Clinton, VEF was established by the U.S. Congress under the Vietnam Education Foundation Act (2000). The VEF exchange programmes bring Vietnamese nationals to the United States to pursue graduate studies or professional development activities, and send American professors to teach at Vietnamese universities. VEF has received an annual budget of U.S. \$5 million from the U.S. Congress from 2000 to 2018. The VEF programs, as prescribed in the VEF legislation, focus only on the major

disciplines of sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics, also known as the STEM fields (VEF, 2016b).

VEF has three core education exchange programmes including: (1) the Fellowship Programme that brings Vietnamese nationals to the United States for graduate degree programs, funded through cost-sharing agreements with U.S. universities; (2) the Visiting Scholar Programme that funds Vietnamese nationals with a Ph.D. to develop their professional skills through study, research, and observational activities at leading U.S. institutions; and (3) U.S. Faculty Scholar Programme that provides grants to American professors to teach courses in English at Vietnamese institutions for one or two semesters (VEF, 2016b).

Since its inception in 2003, VEF has been commended by various stakeholders in Vietnam and the United States for building bridges between the two countries and peoples, contributing to global peace, tolerance, and understanding through educational exchanges activities (VEF, 2012b).

#### **4.3 VEF Fellowship Programme**

The Fellowship Programme which is the main focus of my research is the flagship programme of VEF which was launched in 2003. So far, via this fellowship scheme, 571 Fellows have been supported to attend graduate programs at 101 highly regarded U.S. universities. 66% of the Fellows are males and 34% are females (VEF, 2016b). As of June 2016, 347 Fellows had completed their academic programmes, and among them 244 (70%) have been awarded doctoral degrees and 103 (30%) have received Master's degrees.

The Programme serves as a development aid scheme which creates opportunities for Vietnamese to become pioneers and leaders in their fields. Vietnamese nationals with a bachelor's degree in STEM fields can apply for the Fellowship regardless of where they come from and what their backgrounds are. A Master's degree in STEM fields in the U.S. normally takes two years to complete while it may take up to six years for a Ph.D. degree. After their degree programme completion, the VEF Fellows can stay and apply for work in the U.S. in their field of expertise for up to 18 months as part of their academic training, which helps hone their practical working skills before they return to Vietnam. Similar to grantees of other development scholarship schemes, VEF Fellows are subject to a two-year home residence requirement by the U.S. Department of State (DOS, 2017) which asks them to come back to work in Vietnam for at least two years after they have finished their degree or academic training programme in the U.S. (VEF, 2012a).

The VEF Fellowship Program is not envisioned simply as a funding mechanism for graduate study in the U.S. (VEF, 2016a). Rather, it aims to support the most talented and ambitious Vietnamese, who desire to contribute not only to the scientific and technological progress of Vietnam, but also to the VEF mission of strengthening the relationship between Vietnam and the U.S. To attract the best and brightest candidates, VEF has designed an open, competitive, and transparent application and selection process. A result of this is that U.S. universities can feel confident that they have the highest quality applicants from Vietnam, which in turn builds Vietnam's reputation in the STEM fields. Candidates must have an excellent academic record and significant professional and/or research experience to be selected. In addition, they must demonstrate a strong commitment to the development of Vietnam through their academic and research pursuits proven through their track record of accomplishments and future plans.

To obtain a VEF Fellowship award, an applicant must succeed in all three rounds of the rigorous selection process which lasts more than a year and a half (VEF, 2016a). Firstly, after applicants submit online applications, VEF screens their applications to ensure that the applicants meet all of the minimum requirements. After that, prominent U.S. scientists/professors selected by VEF come to Vietnam to carry out Oral Exams/Interviews. The U.S. interviewers will recommend to VEF the candidates, judged to be most qualified for a VEF Fellowship, to enter the last round, namely applying for admission to U.S. universities. Applicants who succeed in three rounds of the application process will become VEF Fellows and be awarded the VEF Fellowships.

Once the applicants are named Fellows, the VEF Fellowship Programme provides them with continuous support from the time they prepare to depart for the U.S., throughout their academic programme until after they complete their study and return to Vietnam. To prepare Fellows for their new environment in the United States, VEF organizes a five day Pre-Departure Orientation for the newly selected Fellows before their departure from Vietnam. The orientation seeks to provide the skills needed by Fellows to achieve success in academia, to ensure a smooth transition to the U.S., and to enable them to join the VEF Fellows and Scholars network.

While they are in the U.S. for their graduate study, VEF closely monitors them to keep track of their academic performance and to provide support with academic and personal issues. VEF encourages the development of a community among VEF Fellows and Scholars to help them establish professional and personal ties while in the U.S., as well as to maintain these relationships when they return to Vietnam. As one means to this end, VEF organizes an annual conference in the U.S. so that VEF Fellows, Visiting Scholars, and U.S. Faculty Scholars can interact with each other

and with the wider scientific community both (VEF, 2015b). This is also among VEF's effort to prepare the Fellows for their integration process. When the Fellows return to Vietnam, VEF continued to support the Alumni by organizing annual Alumni Conferences for five years from 2009 to 2014. In 2015, due to the financial constraints, VEF could not hold the conference and the VEF Alumni since then have taken charge of the event's organization. These conferences allow the VEF Fellows and Scholars, who have returned to Vietnam, to reunite and make plans for future projects, grants, and collaborations. Through these activities and events, VEF Fellows and Alumni have continued to tighten their friendships and support each other in professional and personal aspects.

The VEF Alumni are now playing crucial roles in the development of science and technology in Vietnam and in strengthening the relationship between the two countries (VEF, 2015a). As of June 2016, of the total of 347 who completed their academic programmes, 47% were working in the academic and research sector; 33% were in the corporate sector; 10% were heading their own private companies or were self-employed; 7% were working in the development sector; and 3% were working in the civil service sector (VEF, 2016b). According to VEF publications, these VEF alumni have taken their experience back to create positive changes and to make significant contributions to Vietnam especially in the STEM fields (VEF, 2015a).

#### **4.4 Women participants of the VEF Fellowship Programme**

In the VEF Fellowship Programme, the number of female Fellows is much lower than that of the male counterparts. Besides the cultural norms and practices that discourage women from applying to study overseas, the low number of females is also attributed to the restriction to the STEM fields of study. As of June 2016, of the 571 VEF Fellows who have been supported to attend graduate programs only 34% are females (VEF, 2015c).

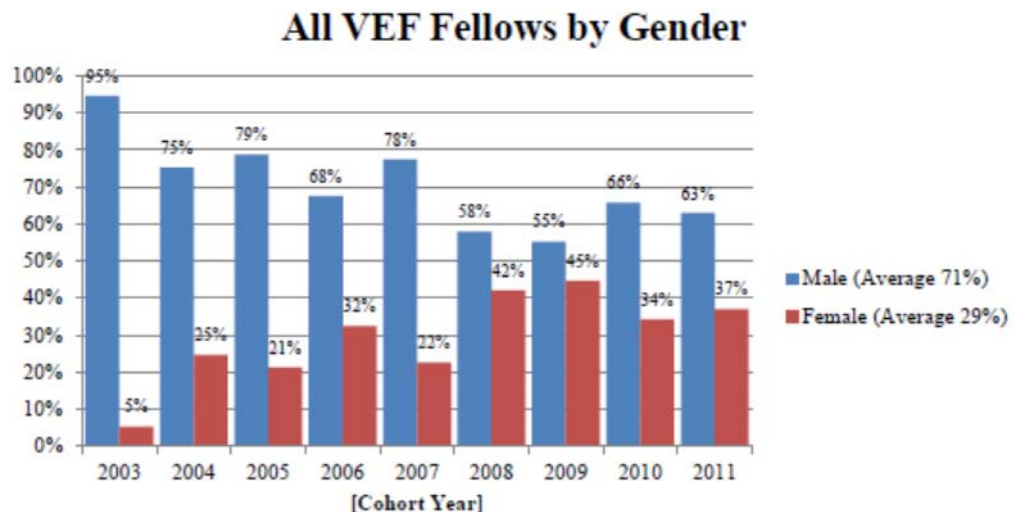
The gender gap in STEM fields is a common phenomenon worldwide (De Welde & Laursen, 2011; Milam, 2012). According to a report of the U.S. Department of Commerce in 2011 (Beede et al.) women are vastly underrepresented in STEM jobs and among STEM degree holders in the United States. Although women fill close to half of all jobs in the U.S. economy, they hold less than 25% of STEM jobs. It is also suggested by Beede et al. that the strong gender stereotypes discourage women from pursuing STEM education and STEM jobs. Meanwhile Milam (2012), Shapiro and Williams (2012) comment that one potential factor in the low number of women in STEM involves social and cultural influences. They further elaborate that from an early age, girls



may be influenced by expectations and stereotypes about gender roles. Girls may also be socialized to believe that science and technology are more appropriate fields for boys even though they might have positive maths and science attitude. It has also been recognized that within STEM fields, the higher you go, the fewer women there are. Whether in education or the workplace, the proportion of women in STEM decreases dramatically at the highest levels (UNESCO, 2015). This is also the case in Vietnam where women are underrepresented in the STEM fields (WB, 2011, p. 29).

With the discrimination towards women in the STEM fields, it seems the female VEF Fellows in general have less favourable conditions than their male counterparts when they pursue their graduate programmes in these specific fields.

However, it should be noted that although there are fewer women than men in each VEF Fellowship cohort, the number of female Fellows has increased significantly, from 5% in 2003 to more than 30%, beginning in 2008. This change is in line with VEF efforts to increase the number of underrepresented groups among VEF Fellows. In recent years, provided that all other qualifications are equal, priority has been given to female VEF applicants (VEF, 2012a). In its public meetings and announcements, VEF has encouraged female applicants to apply for the fellowship awards. The graph below illustrates the changes in the proportion of female VEF Fellows since the first cohort in 2003 through to 2011.



**Figure 3. All VEF Fellows by Gender**

(Source: VEF, 2012a, p. 23)

In terms of the demographic information, according to a report by VEF, at the time the VEF Fellows begin their studies in the U.S., most of them (72%) are aged between 21 and 26 (VEF, 2012a, p. 24) very shortly after they finish their undergraduate degrees. In Vietnam, these are normally the ages women get married. Therefore, for the female VEF Fellows, taking up the opportunity to study in the U.S. for two years for a Master's degree or for five to six years for a Ph.D. degree, though not officially recorded, is likely to affect their personal life. This phenomenon will also be discussed in the findings of my research.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

VEF's contributions in higher education and science and technology in Vietnam and the collaboration between Vietnam and the U.S. have been well recognized. Various stakeholders in Vietnam and the United States have commended VEF for its work in providing the country with a highly skilled workforce in STEM fields and in bridging the relationship between the two countries. Vietnam Minister of Science and Technology Nguyen Quan commented that:

*VEF's efforts in sending hundreds of young and bright Vietnamese students to leading U.S. universities are very valuable to the development of Vietnam's high quality human resources. These students, when returning home, would bring with them knowledge and skills that could not otherwise be gained if they did not have opportunities to study at leading U.S. institutions" (MOST, 2011).*

U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam David Shear praised VEF for providing “*an extraordinary and important investment in the future of Vietnam and the future of our [the two countries'] relationship as well and provides the necessary human capital to drive Vietnam's economic progress*” (U.S. Embassy, 2012). However, examination of VEF's impacts on the lives of female programme participants and how it might have helped to empower these women has been neglected. The upcoming chapters will discuss exactly this matter based on the primary data collected from interviews with a selection of female VEF Fellows.

## **Chapter 5 Research Findings and Discussions: “*It is not just a change, it is a transformation.*”**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This is the first part of two findings chapters based on my interviews with five female VEF Fellows who had studied and lived in the U.S. during their academic programmes and have now returned to work in Vietnam. Their stories provide rich insights into the changes or the “transformations” (as one described them) of their lives after studying and living in the U.S., as well as the challenges and limitations they have to cope with when they came back to Vietnam. This chapter exclusively focuses on exploring the impacts that participating into the VEF Fellowship Programme and having the opportunities to pursue their graduate degree programmes and to live in the U.S. have had on these women. The chapter starts by looking at their experience while studying in the U.S. It then focuses on the positive changes these women have had as a result of their participation in the VEF Fellowship Programme. As I discuss these changes, I will relate the findings thematically to relevant empowerment dimensions of the frameworks as presented earlier.

### **5.2 Challenges, Adaptation and Opportunities while in the U.S.**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, studying in the U.S. is an aspiration of many Vietnamese students. To illustrate the difference between the two countries, the GDP per capita can be used as an indicator. While the U.S. is the largest economy in the world with the GDP per capita of US\$ 54,306, Vietnam is still a developing country which entered the low-middle income group in 2014 with the GDP per capita of US\$2,014 (UN, 2014). Also, the U.S. is known to be home to the best colleges in the STEM fields (Coudriet, 2016). Therefore, for the VEF Fellows, having the chance to study in the U.S. was like a dream come true. Yet, after a short “honeymoon” in the U.S., they had to deal with challenges in both their academic and personal lives.

On the academic front, all five interviewees experienced the same difficulties of dealing with a high workload, a different learning style and English as a foreign language. This combination represented a considerable challenge when they first arrived in the U.S. The first semester was reported as being the most challenging time for them. As the VEF Fellowship is a merit and performance based award, these Fellows are among the brightest students in Vietnam, however, all of the Fellow interviewees found that the workload was much heavier than in Vietnam. A large amount of information was taught in a short period of time in the class times and students were required to study on their own most of the time. The different teaching and learning methods in the

U.S. universities were quite overwhelming to them. They took part in group discussions and debates where they had to proactively speak about their ideas and support them with strong arguments. This was a big change for them as in Vietnam students in general have a very passive learning style as a consequence of the teacher-centred teaching approach (Wong, 2004, p. 158). They mostly listen to and take notes of what the lecturers say and there are very few group discussions. Since these Fellows attended higher education in Vietnam in the final years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or early 2000s, this style of teaching and learning was prevalent during their school years. English language was another challenge to them. Lan and Lyli, who had high English standardized test scores, said that regardless of how high their test scores were they could hardly understand people and make themselves understood when they first came. Trinh said she could only grasp 70% of what the professors said during class time and Minh's writing skills were problematic meaning that she could not properly express her ideas.

Besides difficulties in academic life, these Fellows experienced what was known as "culture shock". The term was coined by the anthropologist Oberg (1960)<sup>1</sup> to describe the psychological reactions people experience when they move to new unfamiliar environments, mostly to a foreign country. The language barrier was one more issue that made it hard for these women to merge into local life when they arrived. Furthermore, having no direct support from family and friends required these Fellows to handle everything on their own. Homesickness and loneliness were quite common feelings of these women during the first semester. Minh in particular said that she lost the support from her family and had to do everything by herself. As for Hong, the cold weather in Virginia (U.S.) made her fall sick and she had to visit the doctor very often during the first winter. Lan reported struggling to figure out how the whole academic, administration and service systems functioned and operated in the U.S. She also found it hard to make friends with other international, especially American, students as she explained:

*I did not know how American students make friends and how they would hang out. I found that they kept distant from me and seemed to be so cold and unfriendly to me. But with time, I came to realize that it was because I was not confident. I had to be the one who reached out to people and took the initiative to connect with them. My English was not good either and I was so hesitant to start a*

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<sup>1</sup> Oberg (1960) mentions several aspects of culture shock: ● strain due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adaptations ● a sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, profession and possessions ● being rejected by, or rejecting, members of the new culture ● confusion in role, role expectations, values ● surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences ● feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment. (p. 180)

*conversation. Also, due to different cultures and practices, some of the things that I did were weird to them. For example, I used an umbrella when it was sunny. People just looked at me in surprise. You know Asian women often tend to protect our skin from the sunshine while Westerners just want to get suntan. So it turned out that it was me who kept distant from others and acted differently. I learnt that I had to be proactive in making friends with them and act, like, “normal”. At that time, I was so down and lonely and I felt miserable. I knew that “cultural shock” was unavoidable since I had been warned of that in advance. But what I was concerned about was how long it would last. I just wanted to shorten that cultural shock phase and it took me about one semester to adapt myself to life in the U.S.*

(Lan Dang)

One semester was also the duration of time it took other Fellows to familiarize themselves with study and life in the U.S. What seemed to be challenges in the first place then became the training ground for them to thrive. The large volume of work required them to work independently and methodologically to meet deadlines and catch up with others. They commented that workload and academic pressures made them resilient. Unfamiliar group discussions and debates turned them into more proactive and confident people. With time and practice, their language skills improved and they became conversant in English. Also, having no support from family meant that they managed to do everything on their own and did not depend on others. When things settled into shape, these Fellows proved themselves to deserve the opportunity the VEF Fellowship had awarded to them by excelling in academic performances. For example, except for a B in the first assignment due to language difficulty, Lan got all As for her Master’s degree. Minh, Lyli and Trinh successfully completed their doctoral degree within the programmes’ timeframe, published a good number of journal articles and gave scientific presentations at different international conferences during their study in the U.S.

Over time, opportunities soon outweighed challenges. They all found that the greatest advantage of studying and living in the U.S. was that they could gain new knowledge, concepts, and skills from their knowledgeable and experienced professors. They had access to the most up-to-date technologies, data and materials in their fields. They also commented that their classmates and friends coming from different parts of the world were so smart and capable that the Fellows could learn immensely from them. Furthermore, all of them appreciated the diverse cultures in the U.S. where they learnt to appreciate the differences and made lasting friendships with international friends. Lan who was reserved and hesitant in the first few months said she enlarged her personal

and professional networks thanks to her active participation in the research work and specialized clubs. The Fellows all made the same comment that once they succeeded in the competitive academic life in the U.S., they became more mature and ready to deal with any challenges that might come up in their life. The saying “*Fire proves gold, adversity proves men [women]*” is proven to hold true in the case of these VEF Fellows.

The stories these Fellows told me about their journey to study in the U.S. on the VEF Fellowship until they returned to Vietnam conveyed their sense of a complete transformation within themselves. The following section will discuss in more detail this transformation as they returned to their home country which is also the focus of this research.

### **5.3 Returning to Vietnam: “*I can feel a strong sense of power that comes from within.*”**

Lan Dang made the statement above during my interview with her. It is interesting to note that during the interview conducted in Vietnamese, apart from introducing the title of my research, I never referred to the terms “empowerment” or “power”. However, Lan took the initiative in using the term “power” in English quite often when she referred to the changes within herself. Lan was not the only one who now owns that sense of power. Other Fellows also commented on the profound changes within themselves after their programmes in the U.S.

#### **5.3.1 Feeling more self-confident and independent**

“*I am now more confident than I was before*” is the first and foremost change these Fellows said they felt since they returned to Vietnam. This sense of self-confidence is built upon a number of factors as a result of their study and life in the U.S. on the VEF Fellowship support. It is both professional and personal life that has been impacted on.

In her interview, Lan could not hide her enthusiasm when talking about her self-confidence which allows her to “live happily to her true self”. Though it was an audio interview, I could feel the strong vibes of her confidence and freedom and imagine how thrilled and elated she was when talking about her change:

*I feel a strong sense of power within myself. I have never thought that a woman can have such a strong power within herself. I have knowledge. I have a good education. I have strong self-confidence. I believe I can do whatever I want. I have never been stronger than at present. I have a chance to discover myself,*

*understand better myself and I am so confident being myself. When I want to do something, such as trying a new outfit, styling my hair, or putting make up on, I can freely follow my wish without being afraid of prejudice or rumours. All of these I would not dare to do previously before going to the U.S. You know as a girl, I was educated to become a traditional woman, a family woman. I was taught how to cook and take care of my family. I had to observe and pay attention to people's thoughts. I used to be so concerned of what people would think about me, how they would react and judge me. But now, I throw away all those barriers. I let myself be my true person, I do what I want and I do not care much about what people may think and judge. Of course, I know the limits where I have to curb myself but I have more chances to explore myself and live my way. That is the power no one can deprive from me as I do not have to depend on anyone. I can take charge of my life and my work so I can do whatever I wish. I can clearly see that I have changed; I have become a new person. At the moment, I can feel that strong sense of power within myself and I am so happy with that transformation... Without my education and life experiences in the U.S., I would not have changed as much as I have so far. (Lan Dang)*

As Lan pointed, it is her knowledge and education, her living experience in the U.S. that she attributed to her transformation to a self-confident and independent woman. When I asked Lan whether she would have changed as much as she has if she had not studied in the U.S. she said that she would still have changed but the changes would probably not be that comprehensive and profound. What Lan has learnt and experienced in the U.S. was extremely influential on her way of thinking and her lifestyle.

Meanwhile, Hong is confident about making a job choice and in public speaking:

*My level of self-confidence has increased since I completed my study in the U.S. Prior to my study in the U.S. when I apply for jobs and got an offer, I accepted the offer right away as I was afraid that I might not have another better offer from other companies. But now, when I applied for jobs, I am confident to wait until I have the best offer before making the final decision. Also, previously I was not so confident in public speaking especially when I talked about some matters that I was not a real expert. But now I can present my ideas very well in public settings. My ideas could be right, or even wrong but the thing is I speak out and listen to other*

*comments so that I can learn from others. This for me is one of the biggest achievements as a result of my study in the U.S. where I joined a lot of group discussions and debated with my teammates [classmates] to defend my ideas and to question theirs. (Hong Truong)*

What made Hong's change was her solid knowledge in green building construction (a field which according to her is still in its infancy stage in Vietnam) thanks to a good education she has had from the U.S. Also, her effort to keep up with other international friends in group discussions in the U.S. has now turned her into a good public speaker.

While Minh, Lyli and Trinh all agreed that their sense of confidence and independence has increased since they studied in the U.S., each identified different contributors to the change. Besides good knowledge in her field of expertise, Minh attributed the scientific method of working during her doctoral programme in the U.S. to her improvements. From that method, she is confident doing whatever she wants. Lyli's opinion was that confidence in each woman was built up over a course of time, especially when they dealt with difficulties and overcame them. During her Ph.D. education in the U.S., there were countless difficulties and hurdles that she had to deal with. With time and experience, they would become more confident. However, she also admitted that a good education in the U.S. is the foundation which has made her believe in herself.

The Fellows' increasing sense of confidence thanks to their good education is in line with what Maslak and Singhal (2008, p. 486) believe. According to these authors, more educated women become more confident and that confidence and independence are developed during and as a result of higher education.

Another area where they exhibited their confidence and independence is their life away from family and the independent lifestyle in the U.S. Trinh said that she was so used to managing everything on her own. In Vietnam, children, including married ones, often live with their parents in an extended family while in the U.S. children over the age of 18 move out and live independently from their parents. Being influenced by the American culture and doing everything on their own, these Vietnamese women have changed to prefer to live an independent life. As for Trinh, before she went to the U.S. her parents did almost everything for her including cooking, but life in the U.S. has taught her to be independent, which she says is also one of the most positive changes happening to her personal life.



In terms of the empowerment theory discussed in Chapter Two, the sense of confidence and independence is a manifestation of the “personal dimension” of the empowerment framework that Rowlands developed (1995, p. 87). According to Rowlands, empowerment in the personal dimension is the process of developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, it is the power that comes from within each individual, encouraging them to make the changes to improve their situation. In the case of these Fellows, a good education and life experiences in the U.S. enabled by the VEF Fellowship, are the factors facilitating the process of empowerment.

In terms of Kabeer’s empowerment framework (1999), the sense of self-confidence and independence, and the “power from within” these Fellows have built up are the demonstrations of the “agency dimension”. As Kabeer argues the agency dimension encompasses the “power within” rather than the visible actions. In this case, a good education, knowledge, skills and life experiences have turned these women into more confident people, activate the power within themselves or in other words the factors have bolster the “agency dimension” of empowerment among these women.

### **5.3.2 Having better decision and choice-making ability**

When asked how their decision and choice-making ability has changed compared to before they joined the VEF Fellowship Programme, these Fellows all agreed that they have become better at making decisions, and with following up and following through with the decisions they have made.

Lan shared an example which vividly showed how much her ability to make decisions has improved after she returned from the U.S. Born and raised in a Northern province nearby Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam, after coming back from the U.S., Lan decided to relocate to Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), a city in the South, a decision she had not been able to make before. When she first completed her undergraduate degree in Hanoi she was offered a good position in HCMC but she did not take it even though she was really interested in the job offer:

*When I just graduated from the undergraduate programme in Hanoi, I was selected to go to HCMC and work for Nestle Vietnam Corporation for a Management Trainee Programme which trained people to become managers for the company. They went to Hanoi to interview candidates from various universities and I was selected among the three best candidates. But If I took the offer, I had to move to HCMC, a distant city in the South. At that time, I just graduated and I did not have any clear*

*direction on where to live and work. In fact, I was very interested in the job offer as I would have a chance to become a manager. But everyone in my family agreed that I should not go to HCMC. They all thought it was not a sensible move as I had neither friends nor relatives in HCMC. Then I decided to stay in Hanoi as per their advice and thought probably they were right. (Lan Dang)*

However, when she came back from the U.S., with the same decision, she could now follow her desire:

*I made the decision to move to HCMC and work in this city even though my family and relatives would think that I was putting myself in a more difficult situation. For them, now that I have a good education, I can find a job in Hanoi (close to my home), get married and live a stable life. They did not understand why I decided to move to HCMC where I have no friends and had to start everything from the scratch and why I had to put myself in a more difficult situation and why I must be crazy like that. My mom was closest to me, though she often supports my decisions, I understand her deep desire for me to stay close to her side and settle down for that is good for a girl. I had to convince her why life in HCMC would be better for me and I decided to move. (Lan Dang)*

She realized that:

*With one same matter of whether or not I should to go to HCMC happening at two different stages in my life, I have two different decisions, the former was influenced by others' advice and experiences and the latter was to follow my wish. Now I listen to myself more than other people and I will be the decision maker not others." (Lan Dang)*

In professional circumstances, Minh, Hong and Lyli have all realized they are now better at making decisions and at negotiating at work. Minh particularly is very pleased with her ability to quit a job, a decision that she was not able to make and go through with before:

*One of the biggest changes for me in the decision making aspect is my ability to quit a job and apply for a new one. Before, I thought that when I got a new job it was such good luck and I did not think of quitting it. But now that I have knowledge and skills I follow my passion to find a job. If I don't like my job, I am not*

*hesitant to quit and find another one and the opportunities are always there for me. I took the lead in the negotiation for salary and benefits when applying for a new job since I have knowledge, experience, and I am capable of doing my work. The new salary needs to be higher than the current one and I am very confident in asking for satisfactory compensation package. (Minh Nguyen)*

Also in agreement with Minh in following her choice of professional passion, Hong said that:

*After I studied in the U.S. and gained new knowledge, I know more clearly what I want and what I like. Before, I chose a job based on the financial benefits and the stability it had to offer. But now I follow my professional dream to do what I want. I chose my current job in Green Building for this same reason. This is the field that I am most interested in. I can't ask for advice from any other colleagues in my company since this field is totally new. I am both working and learning at the same time and it poses a lot of challenges. However, I have the passion for this job and I trust that I will be successful. (Hong Truong)*

Following their passion when applying for a job or even quitting a job, taking control over salary and compensation negotiation, or relocating to a new place of their choice are some of the examples that show how these Fellows are now more capable of making decisions. Compared to before, when they were younger and had not pursued graduate degree programmes and lived in the U.S., they have realized how much they have improved in making choices that they are happy with.

Coming back to Kabeer's empowerment framework (1999) where an aspect of empowerment is the ability to exercise choices, she uses "achievement dimension" to refer to the meaningful choices that individuals have made. Or in Rowlands' empowerment framework (1997), the "relational dimension" includes the ability to negotiate and influence. The VEF Fellows in my research have proven that with education, knowledge and skills, comes the ability to make decisions which are determined by their own wishes and are not influenced by other factors. Therefore, it can be said that education and the chance to study and live in the U.S. on the VEF Fellowship has facilitated the empowerment process of these women in their decision making aspect.

### 5.3.3 Having more opportunities and getting access to more resources

The stories of these five Fellows have suggested that good education and skills bring improved opportunities. All of them now have jobs they are happy with, and the opportunities to further develop in their fields are wide open.

Lan shared that:

*I have more career options than previously. Before, a graduate from a pharmaceutical university would have just a few work choices. I now have more options than that. It is not true that I have to stick 100% to my field of study but I can flexibly apply part of what I have learnt into the new jobs. I don't limit myself to certain job options. I have come up with some of the work ideas that I have never thought of before...Head hunters contact me very often. I have a good education from the U.S., I have also acquired hands-on experience and clinical practice at hospitals and retail pharmacies in the U.S. These chances enable me to apply for many jobs including those in academia or in hospitals. Opportunities are vast and the thing is I have to decide which career direction I will follow. (Lan Dang)*

Hong's ability to wait and then select the best job offer as mentioned earlier also indicates the career opportunities available to her. Trinh's earlier background was in academia where she worked as a lecturer and before applying to VEF, she thought her future career would be limited to teaching and research. Now that she has studied in the U.S., she found that:

*Since I completed my Ph.D., I have realized that I can work in other areas such as industry and my work is not limited within academia only. I can take more risks to try my hands in other interesting areas. (Trinh Le)*

Being passionate about teaching and researching, Lyli was one of the youngest lecturers in Vietnam and in 2014 was the first female VEF Fellow to be promoted to Associate Professor. She attributed her success in applying to international research grant opportunities to her education and research experience in the U.S.:

*I can apply for the seed grants from the U.S. Foundation of Global Research. Of course, it is not only because I have studied in the U.S. that makes them provide me the grants. Yet thanks to the good training in the U.S. and the*

*articles that I have published on the international journals that meet their standard I can apply successfully to those grants. From that, I am trying to expand the research scale and I am working hard on it. (Lyli Nguyen)*

All of these VEF Fellows, including Hong who has just returned to Vietnam for a year, have now secured important positions at work with good incomes and are offered the opportunities they would otherwise not have had. Fellows like Hong, a Project Manager, or Lyli, an Associate Professor, have confirmed their stance at work. These women have proven that with good education and training, the “resources dimension” (N. Kabeer, 1999, p. 437) of empowerment can be consolidated. Their stories also reflect Winthrop and Sperling’s argument regarding the role of education in opening up more professional options for women (2015, p. 27) and what Samina Malik and Kathy Courtney (2011) argue in terms of the relation between higher education and women’s access to better job options, and their financial independence.

#### **5.3.4 Increasing self-respect/self-pride and having more respect from others**

Another positive outcome that these Fellows have realized after they lived and studied in the U.S. is that they have had greater self-respect and also have gained more respect from others.

Minh could not conceal her pride in being part of the VEF Fellow network and having completed her study and training in the U.S. She also shared that other people, especially those in the public health community, have considerable respect for her since she came back to Vietnam:

*I feel like when I mention that I am a VEF Fellow, people in my field have a different look at me in a more respectful way. Many people that I have worked with appreciate the VEF Fellowship Programme highly. When they know that I was selected for the competitive VEF Fellowship, they have more respect for me. The VEF Fellowship award is like a guarantee stamp on my CV, even on my whole life endorsing my ability. People respect and value the VEF Fellowship and that is something I always pride myself on... My family, friends and colleagues have seen that I have been more successful since having the VEF Fellowship and pursuing my doctoral degree in the U.S. One of my classmates at undergraduate level said that in our whole class, I was the most well-educated person in the doctoral program as I was trained most methodologically. Some others may do their Ph.D. overseas but that was just a “sandwich program” in which they spent most of the time in Vietnam and a*

*short period of time in other countries for research. Meanwhile I studied full time in an advanced country like the U.S. That recognition made me very proud of my achievement. (Minh Nguyen)*

Within family context, despite being the youngest child in the family, Minh's voice is now listened by his elder brothers and sisters:

*My elder brothers and sisters value my opinions. They think that I have lots of life experiences, have a good education and that I have studied overseas. Therefore, they listen to my ideas when we discuss our family matters. (Minh Nguyen)*

A sense of self-respect is also true in Hong's story when she talked about her reactions during some job interviews and her attitude towards some conventions that are against her values:

*When I returned to Vietnam, I attended quite a few job interviews and about 70% of the interviewers questioned me: "Why do you work in the construction field? When will you get married and when do you plan to have children?" I was so uncomfortable being questioned about such personal matters in a formal job interview. Previously, when I had not studied and lived in the U.S., I was not concerned and did not take those questions seriously. But now, after my study and life in the U.S., I know how much women are valued in engineering in the U.S. Therefore, I was so disappointed with the gender discrimination towards women in engineering in Vietnam and I decided not to work for those companies...In Vietnam, for construction jobs, contracts often get signed over a party [dinner] table and staff in my company will have to join the party and drink alcohol to host the guests. Before I pursued education and lived in the U.S., I had already not liked the way it worked but now I take it even more seriously and refuse to attend those events. I think I deserve better treatment than that. (Hong Truong)*

The comments from these women show quite clearly that their study and life in the U.S. on the VEF Fellowship has not only helped them gain increased respect from others but also made them become conscious of not having their values or principles undermined. In that sense, I would argue that the VEF Fellowship has improved both the "personal and relational dimensions" of women's empowerment (Rowlands, 1997). In other words, their realization of their personal

strengths and values has been activated. They also have confirmed their voice is now heard in their relationship with others. What Sudha (2000, pp. 207-208) claims in his research is also seen in my findings: Education helps women develop self-respect and the “honour of being educated” makes them proud.

### **5.3.5 Having better and larger personal and professional networks**

One of the benefits of going to study abroad is for the Fellows to meet new people and enlarge their networks of contacts. Additionally, the VEF Fellows have the advantage of making friends with other VEF Fellows in what they affectionately refer to as the “VEF Family”.

Studying in a country like the U.S. with diverse cultures, these Fellows have made good international friends and continued to cooperate with experts in their fields after coming back to Vietnam. Lyli, for example, regularly collaborates with U.S. scientists in her academic work. She has also built new networks with other researchers in Asia and co-authored with them in a number of publications. When Lan came back to Vietnam, she made connections with expats in Ho Chi Minh City where she now works. She had not done this before she went to the U.S. As for Hong, her relationship with other colleagues in the construction field has become closer after her return:

*Before I went to the U.S. for study, I had friends and colleagues in the construction field but I felt like our relationship was not as close as after I completed my study. When I returned from the U.S. they approached me and our connection is better. I think it was thanks to my education in the U.S. People want me to share my experiences and expertise in the field. They want to learn about construction project management in the U.S. (Hong Truong)*

As well as new friends being made, new contacts being added to their network and the quality of the existing connection having grown, these Fellows especially appreciate the VEF Fellows and Alumni Network. Part of the reason they are so proud of being a VEF Fellow and a member of the Network is that they feel the other Fellows are so talented and helpful and the Network is well maintained and connected which might not be the case with other scholarship programmes. Minh said:

*I think that the VEF network that I am having right now will make those who are not a member of VEF feel jealous of me [laugh]. The VEF network has supported each other in many areas. We can collaborate and discuss in our professional field. I*

*think one of the advantages of being part of the VEF Network is the support people render to each other in finding reference materials. VEF consists of all the top students in the STEM fields and whenever we need support with downloading reference materials, the possibility of getting positive feedback is very likely. I am often moved by the unconditional support that the VEF Fellows and Alumni give to each other. I must say I am so blessed to have made friends with those people. VEF Fellows and Alumni also help each other with personal issues. I think the network has developed to an extent that it is very well-rounded and comprehensive. I think it is hard for any other scholarship programmes to have such a strong network. This is my lifetime pride being a VEF Fellow. I pursued my master's degree in the Netherlands also on a scholarship but I did not see a strong network of alumni like this. (Minh Nguyen)*

Lyli backed up Minh's opinion when she said:

*I have had a strong network of VEF Fellows and Alumni who share the same experiences and we can support each other in research and work. I think if I just joined another scholarship programme, I would not have such a good network. (Lyli Nguyen)*

Having more quality connections and being part of a bigger community are contributing towards empowering these women. As Rowlands argues when discussing the “relational and collective dimensions” of empowerment (1997, p. 14), now that these women have more connections, their voice is better heard and they can cooperate with others in their field which means they have more power and resources. It is remarkable to see how the VEF Fellowship has impacted on the lives of these women, offering them much more of value and benefit than merely a graduate degree in the U.S.

### **5.3.6 Serving as agents of changes in Vietnam**

The mission and ultimate purpose of a development scholarship is to create improvements not only to the scholarship recipients individually but more importantly also to the development of a bigger community and to their home country more generally. The VEF Fellowship is not an exception. The VEF Fellows in my research are exemplary in terms of describing the impact and



value of this development aid scheme. They also prove that once women are empowered, they will take action to empower others.

As I have mentioned earlier, among the five Fellows, Lyli is the only one who is married and she now has two children. What she has observed and absorbed from her six years in the U.S. has greatly influenced the way she brings them up. As a graduate student and later on a postdoctoral fellow in the U.S. academic environment, she has experienced first-hand the meaning and expression of freedom of ideas. At her labs in the U.S., students had the right to speak up and argue with their professors to defend their opinions, and equality was valued in her work place back in the U.S. Therefore in educating her children, she says she gives them more freedom in making choices and encourages them to express their ideas and do what they want. Winthrop and Sperling (2015) comment that the most rewarding way of looking at the role of education in women's empowerment is the generative cycle of girls' education. When a woman receives quality education, it starts a positive cycle of education and empowerment from mother to children, generation after generation. Lyli's story reflects how her interactions in the U.S. make this generative impact.

The influences of these Fellows on others also go beyond the family. As a lecturer, Lyli does not impose her ideas on her students but encourages them to engage in open discussions. Her intention is to train students to become real scientists and critical thinkers instead of only doing the technical work and following their lecturers' instructions. The latter is very popular in the Vietnamese education (Wong, 2004).

After coming back to Vietnam, the Fellows have taken part in many community and voluntary activities to share their knowledge with other people. When I asked them about the motivation to do this, they simply said it was the least they could do to "pay it forward". Minh told me about her voluntary activities:

*I am voluntarily teaching English online for students of Thai Nguyen University. I am also teaching medical English for students of Hue Medical University on a volunteer basis. I am really passionate about this community work. When I interact with Vietnamese students who have never studied abroad, I realize that they are often shy and passive. I encourage them to speak up, I share with them the good things that I have studied in the U.S. including how to take care of our health. I share the learning strategies with them and motivate them to be more confident. In my capacity, I support the students with their English learning as I know how important*

*English is. I know Vietnamese students are very capable but they do not have the conditions and resources to optimize their potential.* (Minh Nguyen)

Meanwhile, Lyli works with other VEF Fellows to collect and transfer books from the U.S. to Vietnam in the voluntary Vietnam Book Drive Project. The Project gathers books from different universities in the U.S. and sends them to universities in Vietnam. In her capacity as a pharmacist and with knowledge acquired from the U.S. in the field of healthcare, Lan set up her own online blog to share healthcare and medical knowledge and information with the public.

What these Fellows have done for the community demonstrates that they have utilized the fellowship opportunity to not only improve their own situation but also the lives and wellbeing of many others. To that end, they have carried out the optimal mission of development in bringing about positive changes within the community. While these actions may start on a small scale, they hope they will kindle motivations, aspirations and kindness within the younger generation. As such the fellowship award that brings about good education for these women has transformed them into agents of changes. This resonates with Noreen's argument on the impacts of education on women (2015, pp. 18-19) which states that education transforms women into agents of changes and through which the target of women's empowerment at the society level can be achieved.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

These five VEF Fellows, despite their different backgrounds, different academic programmes and different life experiences in the U.S., have shown that the VEF Fellowship not only offered them a good education but also a significant transformation. From passive and reserved students, they have now become proactive and self-confident women. From accepting gender discrimination towards women in the workplace, they have built up self-respect and also gained respect from others. If previously, their decisions were influenced by many external factors thus they might not have ended up with the preference, now they can make a decision following their own wishes. They are also able to access more career opportunities and enlarge their networks. In return, these VEF Fellows have exercised their expertise and positive attributes to support others within their family, their workplace and the community. In terms of the empowerment theories (N. Kabeer, 1999; Rowlands, 1997), this transformation is a manifestation of women's empowerment process. The positive changes for these women are due to the positive impacts of the Programme on the process of women's empowerment. However, the re-integration of these Fellows back home

was not always so straightforward and positive. The next chapter explores the challenges, limitations and the difficulties facing these women when they returned to Vietnam.

## **Chapter 6 Research Findings and Discussions: Challenges and Limitations to VEF Fellows on Return Home**

### **6.1 Introduction**

Leaving their home country and their work to go to the U.S. from two to seven years and then coming back, these VEF Fellows have encountered a number of challenges and limitations. This chapter will first explicitly discuss the cultural challenges that the Fellows had to deal with when they reintegrated back to their home country or what is often known as “reverse culture shock”. As women with high levels of knowledge and skills working in the STEM fields in Vietnam, they have to deal with some discrimination and problematic stereotypes that may not be familiar to women in other professional fields. Therefore, this chapter also explores the specific difficulties these Fellows endure when they come back to work in the STEM fields in Vietnam. The chapter goes further to analyse the difficulties confronting these women in their personal lives when they made the decision to leave Vietnam to study in the U.S. The challenges reflect the negative impacts that participating in the VEF Fellowship has had on these women which to some extent limits their empowerment. However, what really matters eventually is their attitude and the way they tackle these challenges. Overall, the women did not regret the choice they made to further their studies and the positive changes they now have truly outweighed the challenges.

### **6.2 “Reverse culture shock”: Challenges for re-adaptation**

When these women first arrived in the U.S., the new life in a foreign country was overwhelming and unfamiliar. When they returned to Vietnam, although they had been prepared for the reintegration through the VEF Annual Conferences in the U.S., they were still surprised that it took them time quite a long time to adjust and adapt back to life and work in their home country. They all found that after only a few years living in the U.S., they have changed tremendously in their way of thinking, attitude, style, and culture; while people in Vietnam and the country as a whole had not changed much at all. Consequently, some felt lost at home when they first returned and they had to make re-entry adjustments to adapt. This phenomenon is commonly known as “reverse culture shock” which is described by Wang (1997) as “one’s losing the signs and symbols of social intercourse during the transition into one’s home culture after living and working in another culture” (p.115).

Minh shared her feelings when she returned to Vietnam six years ago:

*I was used to U.S. academia and life, so coming back to Vietnam is a different experience. I was a little shocked in the first place. There were things that happened beyond my expectations and I often asked myself “Why could that possibly happen? How come that happened?” I felt lost when I first came home, and I did not adapt right away to the environment in Vietnam. (Minh Nguyen)*

Adjusting to life in Vietnam took her a longer time than it had taken to adjust when she first arrived in the U.S. Also in agreement with Minh, it took Lan more than a year to “gradually reach the real life in Vietnam” as she expressed it.

Life in the U.S. has changed them to be more independent but at the same time, that independence causes some negative reactions from their family and old friends:

*When I first returned to Vietnam, I felt like I was an unrealistic person, I was still hovering on the clouds and not down to earth yet. It took me more than a year to gradually reach the real life. I was so deeply involved in life in the U.S. I wanted to be part of the community back there so I have changed too much. I feel like I live more independently and separate from my family. I feel like I am now more “Westernized” and am influenced by the American people. In the U.S. grown-up children do not stay in the same house with their parents. They keep a connection but do not heavily depend on each other. Sometimes, people in my family feel that I keep distant from them. With my old friends, I have changed the way of thinking so much that it is harder for me to share things with them as we don’t have the common background. (Lan Dang)*

What happened to Trinh in her relationship with her family members is also similar to Lan:

*Because I got used to the independent living style in the U.S., I found it a little bit difficult to be “controlled” by my parents. For example, when I do something, my parents would ask me about that while back in the U.S. no one questioned me about my personal life. The most negative change is that I think I can now live on my own and don’t depend on others so sometimes I feel like I don’t need many people around me and I don’t really need help from others. That seems to distance me from others. (Trinh Le)*

“Reserve culture shock” also occurred in the workplace ranging from different working styles, to the promotion mechanism, and to the way work is implemented. The following quotes from Lan Dang illustrate her struggles to readjust in the Vietnamese working environment:

*In Vietnam, in order to get promoted and move up professionally people need to have connections. Who you know is sometimes more important than who you are. In the business sector, the unofficial relationship is sometimes very critical. I have to adjust to that as it is the nature of the business and working environment in Vietnam.*

*My working style is different from others. As I feel so confident about myself, people can also feel that sense of confidence from me. However, the Vietnamese style is different; people tend to be more humble and modest. People, therefore, may look at me differently. Before I was humble and that created challenges when I went to the U.S. The modesty devalued me and people seemed to look down on me when I was modest. Back then if I was able to do 100% of the task, I said that I could just do 80%. I had been taught to be modest and say less than what I actually could do. Meanwhile my international friends just proudly said what they could do and they were so confident. I gradually learnt that modesty did not work quite well for me and that if I knew something, I had to show that I could do it. I changed while in the U.S. and brought that change back home. Again, it is different in Vietnam, it is the old environment and I have to learn to adjust. My boss is a foreigner but all my other colleagues are Vietnamese and they still have that traditional modest style.*

*In the U.S., people are very straight forward and I am used to that. At meetings and discussions at my office, I just speak up my ideas which sometimes contradict my colleagues’. I separate personal and professional matters. But my colleagues take them personally. Vietnamese people tend to beat around the bush to save face for others rather than go straight to the point. (Lan Dang)*

In Lyli’s view, working with some of her Vietnamese colleagues still poses challenges that are hard to adjust to although she has been back for seven years:

*In some cases when I know their [Vietnamese colleagues’] working style, it is hard for me to adapt as we are so different. My collaboration with the Vietnamese*

*contacts and network is not strong. I have made a lot of effort but improvements have not been quite noticeable. How to set a common goal and how to build up trust are still hard to achieve. I can collaborate and co-author with other researchers from the U.S., Japan, and Singapore, more easily as I know what they expect from me and in return what to expect from them from the beginning. But in Vietnam, it is not clear what other researchers expect from me and what to expect from them as they are not straightforward. Or else they might change what they said in the beginning and I really need time to adapt to that working style. (Lyli Nguyen)*

Another aspect of “reverse culture shock” is disappointment on return. Studying and living in a developed country like the U.S. has resulted in the feeling of disappointment when they return to a developing country like Vietnam. In Lyli’s case, having studied in one of the best universities in the world and now a mother of a soon-to-be first grader, she is not satisfied with the infrastructure and services in Vietnam, especially with the quality of primary education:

*Transportation, food safety, health care, and education are my biggest concerns when coming back to Vietnam. Choosing a school for my child is a pressure for me as well since they will become guinea pigs for the education reforms<sup>2</sup> in Vietnam which are not built up on any solid foundation. (Lyli Nguyen)*

However, in spite of complaining about these difficulties, these women have learnt to become more flexible. Lan “still keeps the good traits but learns to adjust to suit the culture and work in Vietnam” while Lyli reminds herself to have a more practical and down-to-earth view point when looking at things. Also, their effort to grow what I would term “the good and positive seeds” in Vietnam through their work, their teaching and their voluntary community services is effective response to these challenges and limitations.

### **6.3 Challenges for women in STEM fields in Vietnam**

Compared to other women whose fields of study do not fall within the STEM group, the VEF Fellows have had to cope with some specific obstacles when they returned home.

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<sup>2</sup> Experts say Vietnam's education system is widely regarded as being in crisis at all levels. Teaching methods remain too passive, with students having little chance to interact with the teacher, discuss issues, or ask questions. Education reforms are badly needed but so far changes have not proven to be successful and this has created much chaos (Dien, 2013).

In a patriarchal society like Vietnam, women have had to bear numerous family responsibilities as wife, mother and daughter-in-law (Goodkind, 1995; Kabeer et al., 2005). This increases the difficulties for women in STEM fields even more because according to these women, STEM is not a women-friendly area: it requires them to invest a large amount of time and efforts and especially to have a great passion. Meanwhile there are still prejudices on women working in these fields. While Lyli is the only married woman of the five Fellows interviewed, the other four agree that Vietnamese women have less time for sciences as they are expected to do the housework, take care of children, and of parents of both their natal and in-law families.

Although she is now an Associate Professor and could apply successfully for a number of grants from both national and international organizations, Lyli cannot help noticing the gender disparity between men and women in the STEM field in the country:

*The chance for women to apply for big research grants is less than men. Even though it is not written anywhere that men are favoured in doing sciences or in applying for grants than women but when we look at the outcomes, we see that men outnumber women in applying successfully for the grants or in taking the senior positions in STEM fields. I think gender disparity in Vietnam especially in the STEM field is still a remaining issue. (Lyli Nguyen)*

What Lyli stated is supported by studies in this area, for example, research has shown that the gender gap between women and men in STEM fields in Vietnam is quite large. From 2007 to 2012 only 26% of the Associate Professorships and only 11% of the Professorships in STEM fields were awarded to women (Khanh, 2012).

The gender disparity in STEM fields is not merely caused by women's shortage of time to dedicate to science. Gender discrimination is a contributing factor accounting for this gap. Having a good U.S. based education and securing good working positions do not prevent these VEF Fellows from encountering negative gender stereotypes. Hong's interview excerpt in the previous chapter about the questions she was asked in her job interviews is representative of this discrimination. In Lan's case, prejudice towards women in the STEM field turned what is an advantage in other areas of life into a disadvantage in her professional life:

*When people look at my appearance, none of them think I am working in the STEM fields. People have a prejudice that women working in the hard science fields*



*should look more “sciency” (i.e. more serious and formal). Meanwhile I do not have that “scientific look”, so people doubt whether I am doing real science. I think generally a good looking appearance can be an advantage but in some cases, especially in the STEM fields, it can be a disadvantage. Often, people think that the nice and feminine looking girls are not quite as good in their professional job and they are not capable of working in research or basic sciences. Since they have that prejudice, it is quite challenging for me to make a good impression on people in the professional context. Although I am on par with men in the field but since people tend to have that stereotype in mind, it takes me time to prove my capability and to show them that I can do real science. So at work, the nice looking appearance seems to be an obstacle for me. (Lan Dang)*

In fact, what Lan endured has been reported Banchevsky, Westfall, Park, and Judd (2016) when they find that feminine appearance affects career judgments for female scientists (with increasing femininity decreasing the perceived likelihood of being a scientist), but appearance has no effect on judgments of male scientists. Furthermore, research by Hill, Corbett, and St Rose (2010) indicates that most people associate STEM fields with “males” and that people often hold negative opinions of women in “masculinity” positions such as scientists or engineers. Their report suggests that people judge women to be less competent than men in “male” jobs unless they prove their success in their work. The stories of the Fellows imply that though equipped with a good education and many desirable attributes, they still need to overcome social norms and practices which hinder gender equality in the STEM fields.

Yet, it should be acknowledged that gender discrimination varies in different areas within the STEM fields. Minh who works in the public health sector commented that there is not a clear signal of gender disparity in her field and the number of female workers is even more than their male counterparts.

Another challenge facing these Fellows when they come back to Vietnam is that the less developed working conditions and the infrastructure in the research laboratories in Vietnam make it harder for them to apply what they have studied in the U.S. in Vietnam. Trinh said that: *“For people like me in the biomedical sciences we need advanced lab facilities for research. And we do not have such resources in Vietnam.”* And for Lan: *“Vietnam is a developing country and what we have learnt in the U.S. is not quite practical here.”*

However, what is remarkable is that they look at challenges and obstacles with an open mind and see potentials in limitations. After coming back to Vietnam, Lyli and Minh have learnt to tackle difficulties and failures in a more positive way. According to Lyli:

*We should also look on the bright side and see how we can turn the adversity into advantages. Since everything is new in Vietnam, we have the opportunity to develop and implement our ideas, we also have the chance to develop new teaching curriculum and subjects and to contribute to the community. I think we should not just look at the difficulties but we need to look on the positive side as well.*  
(Lyli Nguyen)

What these Fellows are determined about is the objective of this development aid scheme: training the leaders in their fields so that they can make good changes in Vietnam. They have affirmed that the opportunity the VEF Fellowship Programme has given them has been well worth it.

#### **6.4 Unexpected impacts on personal life**

Spending from two to six years of their early adult life on their graduate degree in the STEM fields has affected the personal and love life of these women. It happened to be the case that four of five women I interviewed are single. Three of them are now in their 30s and one is in her 40s. In Vietnam, women normally get married in their 20s. The age of 30 or more is often seen as “alarming” for women who are unmarried by then. When I asked these women what the biggest challenge in their personal life is, three of them joked that they are concerned about finding a suitable partner and are concerned about when they will get married. They answered my question with laughter but I understand there is often some truth behind a joke. Lyli, the only married woman in the group, also commented that:

*I really care about the love life of the female VEF Fellows. I think their love life is affected dramatically because of their study in the U.S. I realize that among them are quite a few people who have not got married yet though they are not young in terms of age anymore. I am not sure if it is because they have spent a long time studying and training in the U.S. and they were so focused on their academic programme that they did not have time to find a suitable partner. Or it may be because they have a high academic level and when coming back to a less developed country like Vietnam, the chance for them to meet with a suitable match is less likely. I*

*think that is one of the negative influences of studying, on female Fellows. Maybe the typical characteristics of the STEM fields make it hard for these Fellows to have a suitable partner. They have been studying too hard and not cared enough about their appearance like women in other fields such as social sciences or arts. Plus, they are also very intellectual and critical, which makes it even more difficult for them to find a partner. (Lyli Nguyen)*

Lyli's comments have mostly focused on the VEF Fellows as the problem (their focus on study or their lack of care for their appearance) rather than indentifying the patriarchal views in Vietnamese society as the problem i.e. expecting women to look or behave in certain ways. Also, it is totally possible that the women may marry later but have a happier and more equal marriage. Therefore her observations may not be the only answers but probably help explain part of the personal situation these Fellows are in. Of course one's love life is a sensitive and complicated topic that requires specific expertise and skills to research. Yet, since similar comment was offered by four out of five research participants, this can be seen as an unexpected outcome of participating in the VEF Fellowship Programme for these women. So far, research on the impact of studying graduate degree programmes abroad, especially in the STEM fields, on women's love life has not been conducted in Vietnam. This may suggest a topic for further study in the future.

In exchange for the advanced knowledge and skills in their field and for new life experiences, these women realize they are at some certain disadvantage in their personal life. However, all of them agreed that the VEF experience has satisfied all of their expectations. They are all happy to have been able to pursue their academic programme in the U.S. and are satisfied with the changes they have gone through. Being more self-confident and independent and taking pride in themselves, these Fellows do not feel intimidated or disempowered by any of these more challenging impacts.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

The findings in this chapter indicate that there are some negative impacts on female VEF Fellows when they come back and work in Vietnam. However, such challenges as reserve culture shock, gender discrimination in the STEM fields or the influences on their personal life do not outweigh the overall positive and empowering impacts that the VEF Fellowship award has brought to them. As agents of change, with strong knowledge, skills and many desirable attributes accumulated over the years, these Fellows are taking control of their lives and are making positive

changes in Vietnam. They have also confirmed that good education and skills can transform them to be stronger and more resilient women. That said, overall the VEF Fellowship Programme has had a positive impact in empowering these women.

## **Chapter 7 Conclusions**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter sums up the research report with concluding statements on how the research findings align with the theoretical frameworks. It also provides the answers for the two research questions that were raised at the start of the research. At the same time, from the findings of the research, the chapter affirms that education scholarships as part of development aid schemes is, overall, an enabling factor for the empowerment process of the female recipients. The chapter also analyzes the implications of this research and suggests recommendations for further study.

### **7.2 Concluding statements**

From the framework analysis and the research findings and discussions, this report has answered the two research questions set from the beginning and realized the research aim in exploring the impacts the international development scholarship programmes have had on women's empowerment in the context of Vietnam drawing on a case study of the VEF Fellowship Programme and its female Fellows.

As with the first research question on the potential impacts that the international development scholarships have had on the empowerment of the female scholarship recipients, it can be concluded that the VEF Fellowship Programme has made positive and enabling impacts on the empowerment of the female VEF Fellows and at the same time created some challenges.

Different stories of the female VEF Fellows have shown that the VEF Fellowship not only offered them a good education, new professional knowledge and skills and cross-cultural life experiences but also a complete transformation in terms of how they see themselves and conduct themselves. From passive and reserved students, they have now become self-confident and independent women. From accepting gender discrimination towards women in the workplace, they have built up self-respect and also gained respect from others. If previously, their decisions were interfered with by many external factors and they might not have ended up with their preference, now they can make a decision following their own wishes. They are also able to access more career opportunities and enlarge their networks. In return, these VEF Fellows have exercised their expertise and positive attributes to support others within their family, their workplace, the community and the country at large. In terms of the empowerment theories (N. Kabeer, 1999; Rowlands, 1997), this transformation is a manifestation of the women's empowerment process. The

positive changes of these women are representative of the positive impacts of the Programme on their empowerment.

Nonetheless, taking on the study opportunity also created some negative outcomes influencing their empowerment. Leaving their home country and their work to go to the U.S. from two to seven years, when coming back, these VEF Fellows have encountered “reverse culture shock”, the feeling of loss and disorientation, negative reactions from family and friends for their being allegedly “Westernized”, and dissatisfaction with the Vietnamese working style, services and infrastructure. In addition, in spite of their high levels of knowledge and skills, they have to deal with gender discrimination and problematic stereotypes in the STEM fields. Taking on the scholarship to study graduate degree programmes in the U.S. also affected these women’s personal and love life. It can be inferred that these challenges reflect the negative impacts that participating in the VEF Fellowship has had on these women which to some extent limits their empowerment.

However, overall these Fellows did not regret the decision they had made to pursue higher education in the U.S. More importantly they took actions to tackle these challenges and confirmed their position in the workplace and in the society. In their view, the positive changes they now have truly outweigh the challenges. To that end, the overall empowering impacts of the VEF Fellowship Programme have answered the second research question: The Fellows have felt empowered by participating into the VEF Fellowship Programme.

In comparison with other literature on the topic of development scholarships and their impacts on women’s lives (Lockley, Ovignton, & Shah, 2015; Spark, 2010; Wild, 2007), my findings share common features when confirming that the scholarships bring both positive and challenging outcomes for women. While thanks to these awards, women are equipped with new skills, knowledge, increased networks of contacts and new professional opportunities, when they come back to their home countries, there are social norms and problematic stereotypes that obstruct gender equality. However, what makes my research findings different from the others is that the women in my research do not compromise with gender discrimination; they looked on the bright side and took actions to challenge the social hurdles. During their academic tenure in the U.S., these women have to cope with and overcome countless academic and life obstacles before completing their study. By taking part in the rigorous academic programmes, gaining new skills and knowledge, adapting to living in a new cross-cultural environment, merging into extra-curriculum activities, and enlarging their network and contacts, these women have grown to be more knowledgeable, confident and well-rounded figures and ultimately empowered women.

The fact that these Fellows are now successful scientists and engineers has conveyed a more meaningful message: women can work and succeed in the fields that are stereotyped to suit men better (Beede et al., 2011; Shapiro & Williams, 2012). They are the role models for the girls and other women to follow; they break the prejudice that STEM fields are not for women. In that sense, education and the scholarship opportunity that VEF has offered these Fellows serves as ample evidence confirming that women are not less capable than men in any fields.

The research findings also prove that women's empowerment might be achieved through education scholarships as part of development aid schemes. Or in other words, education development aid can help facilitate the process of women's empowerment. Development scholarships are not only a means to enhance people's expertise in specific professional fields but from a gender perspective they are effective tools to promote and sustain the position of women participants. More importantly, the awards granted to women have compelling impacts on transforming not only the women recipients themselves but also other women and the wider community. Research findings also indicate that besides access to a more advanced education, living in a more developed and less patriarchal country and interacting with people coming from diverse backgrounds and cultures also contributes to the empowerment process of these women.

### **7.3 Implications and recommendations for further study**

The research has provided new insights into outcomes of the VEF Fellowship Programme. It is not only a development scholarship scheme that builds excellence for Vietnamese human resources in the STEM fields and strengthens the relationship between Vietnam and the U.S. but from a gender perspective it also helps empower the female participants of the Programme. Therefore, other scholarship schemes may also consider assessing the women's empowerment impacts as another approach in evaluating the outcomes of their programmes.

The research findings also suggest that there are gender disparities in STEM fields in which women have not been on par with men in terms of work promotion or successful rate of grant applications. Women still have to suffer from discrimination and negative stereotyping which are unfavourable for their success in these fields. In a patriarchal society such as Vietnam where women are expected to take care of almost all the housework and child bearing and rearing responsibilities, it is even more challenging for women in the STEM fields to be fully devoted to their academic pursuit of hard sciences. As such, gender inequality in the STEM fields in Vietnam remains an issue that needs to be tackled.

Furthermore, Vietnam lacks incentive programmes or mechanisms to encourage and promote women in the STEM fields, hence the disappointment of the Fellows when they come home to work. Therefore, it is essential that gender considerations be taken into account by the governmental decision makers and concerning bodies to facilitate women's contribution in the STEM fields. That is one of the ways to enhance and sustain women's empowerment.

The VEF Fellows interviewed have a common comment that they are so proud of the VEF Alumni and Fellows Network and still stay connected with other VEF members. Together they are collaborating in joint research and projects of mutual interest. These are due to the continued facilitation and connection of the VEF Programme to link its awardees with each other even after the Fellows have completed their programmes under the VEF sponsorship. Drawing on my personal working experience in the development scholarship area in Vietnam for almost a decade and being a Vietnamese NZAid grantee myself, I have not seen such a strong and ongoing connection among other programme grantees. In order for a scholarship development programme to magnify its impacts, post-scholarship or alumni activities should hold an important place in the working agenda of the scholarship body as well. From a gender perspective, since women are more vulnerable than their male counterparts and they still encounter gender related discrimination when coming back to their home country, scholarship schemes need to organize specific preparation programmes for re-integration or establish collective support networks for female participants prior to their return. After that, it will still be necessary to maintain these support systems. These activities can be initiated by the programme administrators but may be transferred to the alumni later on so that they can sustain the alumni activities in the long run even after the sunset of the scholarship schemes.

Based on this research, there are several areas in which further studies should be conducted. Firstly, with more time and resources, research which combines qualitative and quantitative methods could be helpful to compare and contrast different impacts of different scholarship development aid programmes on women's empowerment. A comparative study that shows the variations of outcomes associated with the differences in terms of fields of study and host countries, taking into consideration the demographic information of the participants will be helpful to look at the different impacts of the programmes.

Secondly, from this report it is suggested that gender discrimination is not the case in the field of public health but it is of great concern for women in other fields. Therefore, I would recommend that research to explore gender discrimination in different STEM fields could be helpful to investigate the root causes and to propose solutions for gender disparities in such fields.



Thirdly, how participating in an international scholarship programme has affected the personal and family life of the female participants could also be researched. In the context of Vietnam where women are in a more disadvantaged position than men and women's images are stereotyped in the traditional roles of an obedient wife and caring mother, this topic may help shed light on the potential changes, challenges as well as the opportunities these women scholarship recipients might have after they return to their home country.

On a personal note, working for the VEF Fellowship Programme for quite a few years and being a female recipient of a development scholarship award myself, through this research I have understood better the impacts of the programme, especially on the women's empowerment aspect. While it is encouraging to know of the positive and empowering outcomes of this development aid on the process of women's empowerment, learning about the gender related stereotypes and prejudices challenging these well-educated women makes me realize that there is still a long way to go until gender equality between men and women is achieved.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1: Information Sheet for Research Participants**

#### **Researcher's Introduction**

My name is Hanh Bui and I am a Master's student of the International Development programme at Massey University, New Zealand. I am conducting a one semester research report in partial fulfilment of the requirements for my Master's degree. As you may know, I used to work for the Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF) at the Hanoi Field Office. However, I resigned from my position last year to resume my graduate study. My contact details are: Phone: + 64 223 919 806 and email: [hanhbuihanh@gmail.com](mailto:hanhbuihanh@gmail.com)

#### **Project Description and Invitation**

##### **Project Description:**

My research project will explore the impacts that the international development scholarship programmes have had on women's empowerment in the context of Vietnam drawing on a case study of the VEF Fellowship Programme. The way I plan to conduct the research is to carry out online interviews via Skype with about five female Fellows of the VEF Fellowship Programme to explore how participating in the programme has impacted their lives and whether or not it facilitates the process of women's empowerment. Based on the research findings, I hope to understand better the effectiveness of the development scholarship programmes in enhancing gender equality and as a result be able to offer some suggestions and recommendations to enhance women's empowerment in the context of Vietnam.

##### **Invitation:**

Thank you for taking the time to read this form and for considering being involved in this research. I would like to invite you to participate in an informal, voice-recorded, approximately 30 minute to an hour long Skype interview. If you are interested and can arrange time to participate in this research, please reply to me by **Friday, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017**. I would really appreciate your support.

#### **Participant Identification and Recruitment**

I am contacting a select group of female VEF Alumni who have returned to work in Vietnam. Your contact email is publically available in the VEF Achievements and Directory: [https://oms.vef.gov/achievement\\_and\\_directory/index.php](https://oms.vef.gov/achievement_and_directory/index.php)

### **Project Procedures**

After receiving this information sheet and the attached consent form, please reply to my invitation by the deadline specified above. For those of you who accept this invitation, I will then contact you individually via email or Skype or Facebook Messenger to further arrange for the interviews. After the interview, I may need to contact you for further clarification if necessary and will send you the transcriptions upon your request.

### **Data Management**

All information will be treated confidentially and the identity of all interviewees will be protected by the use of pseudonyms. You can choose the pseudonym you want. Following standard practice, all data will be kept in a safe and secure place, for example, recordings and transcribed interviews will be stored in my personal computer and be encrypted with a password. Data collected from the interviews will be used only for this research report and any related publications with the consent of interviewees.

If you wish to have access to your own recorded interview and/or the transcription, I will send it to you. If you are interested in my project findings, I will send you a summary of the findings.

### **Participant's Rights**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study at any time during participation;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

### **Project Contacts**

If you have any questions or queries related to my research project, please contact me (contact details as provided above) and/or my supervisor: Dr. Robyn Andrews, Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at Massey University, New Zealand, Phone: +64 6 356 9099, extn 83653, or email: [R.Andrews@massey.ac.nz](mailto:R.Andrews@massey.ac.nz)

### **Ethics Committee Approval Statement**

*This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director - Ethics, telephone 06 3569099 ext 86015, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz)*

## Appendix 2: Consent Form

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – INDIVIDUAL

*(Please tick the appropriate box.)*

☐ I have read the Information Sheet and agreed to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet. I have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

☐ I understand that I have the right to decline to answer any particular question and to withdraw from the study at anytime.

I ☐ agree/

☐ do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I ☐ wish/

☐ do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.

☐ I understand that I can ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

**Full Name:**

### **Appendix 3: List of Interview Questions**

#### **Initial questions:**

1. When did you return to Vietnam after completing your Master's/Ph.D. in the U.S. via the VEF Fellowship Programme?
2. What were your expectations when you applied to the VEF Fellowship to pursue your Master's/Ph.D. degree in the U.S.?
3. What were the opportunities/positive changes of studying and living in the U.S. that you experienced while in the U.S?
  - Opportunities of studying?
  - Opportunities of living?
4. What were the challenges of studying and living in the U.S. that you experienced while in the U.S.?
  - Challenges of studying?
  - Challenges of living?
5. Do you think before you participated in the VEF Fellowship Programme, your chances/opportunities in personal and professional life were more or less limited than after you completed your study?

#### **Self-confidence**

6. Since you completed your program in the U.S. and returned to Vietnam, have you felt more or less self-confident in both personal/family life and professional/work life? Do you think you can now make/achieve things that you couldn't have otherwise achieved without participating into the Fellowship Programme?

*(Please elaborate with details.)*

#### **Decision and choice -making**

7. Since you completed your study programme in the U.S., what changes might you have seen in your power to make decision both in personal/family and professional/work contexts?

*(Please elaborate with details.)*

#### **Access to resources/opportunities:**

8. What chances/opportunities have opened up for you in your personal and professional development when you come back to Vietnam after your study in the U.S.?

9. What challenges/limitations have you faced up with in your personal and professional development when you come back to Vietnam after your study in the U.S.?

**Influence on, and relationships with, others:**

10. What are the changes you might have seen in your relationship with others (family, friends and colleagues) since you joined the VEF Fellowship Program?

11. What are the changes to your personal and professional network since you joined the VEF Fellowship Program?

**Other questions:**

12. What are the most significant changes, either positive or negative, about your personal/family life and work/career as a result of your participation into the VEF Fellowship Programme to study in the U.S.?

13. Since you returned to Vietnam, what are the biggest challenges in your personal and professional life you have had, especially as a female professional in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields?

14. Do you have any suggestions to help other female VEF Fellows overcome these challenges as they return and work in Vietnam?

15. To what extent have your expectations of taking part in the VEF Fellowship Programme been met since you completed your study?

16. Besides the financial provision for your graduate study in the U.S., what do you think VEF has done to support you during and after you completed your degree program? What should VEF have done better/more effectively to support you over the course of time?

17. Are there any other things/ideas you would like to share that I might not have asked you in relation to your experience with the VEF Fellowship Programme?

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